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WESTERN

15
STORIES

TALES

25
CENTS

A STORY OF
VENGEANCE BULLETS

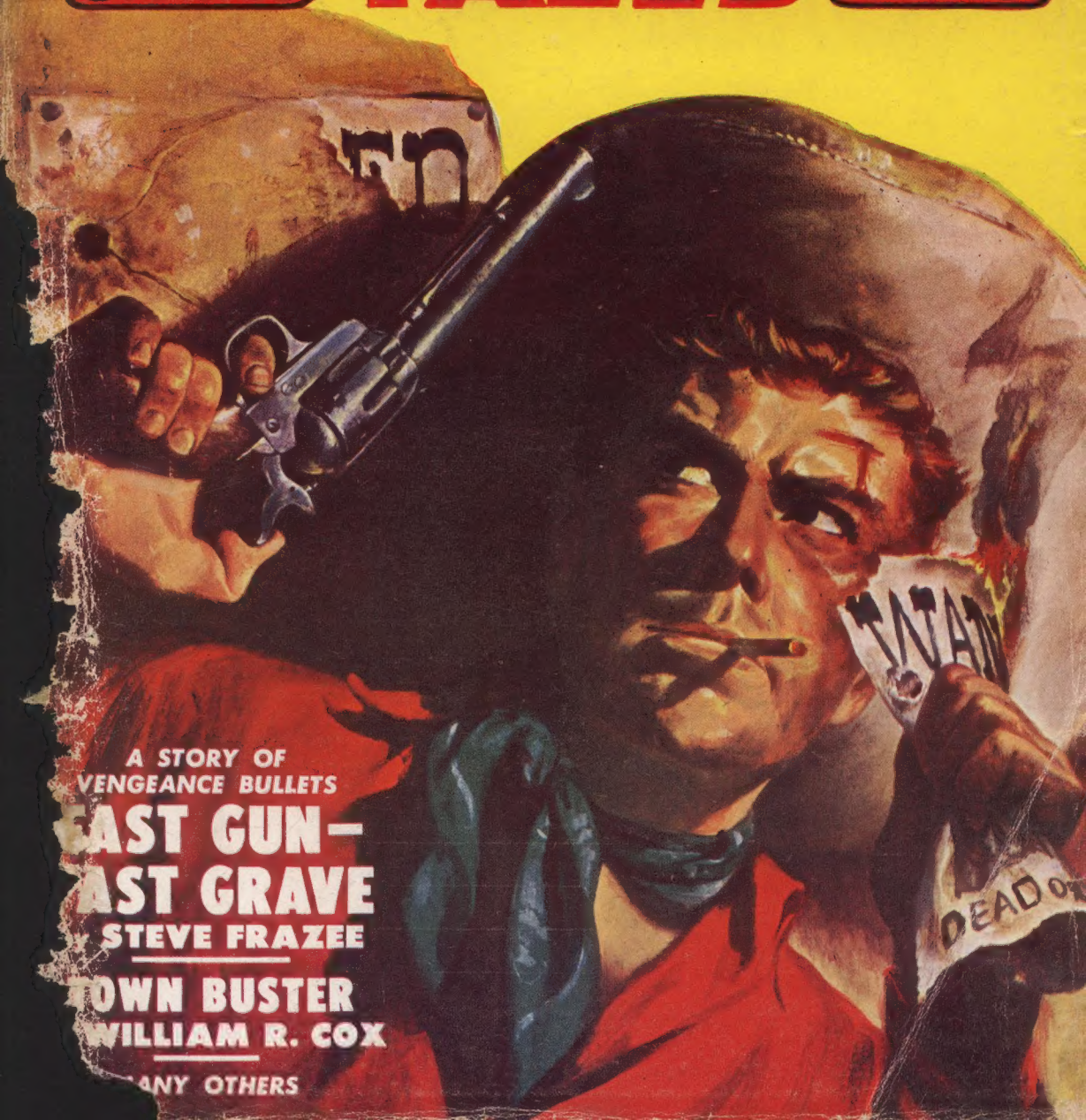
**HOT GUN—
HOT GRAVE**

STEVE FRAZEE

TOWN BUSTER

WILLIAM R. COX

AND MANY OTHERS



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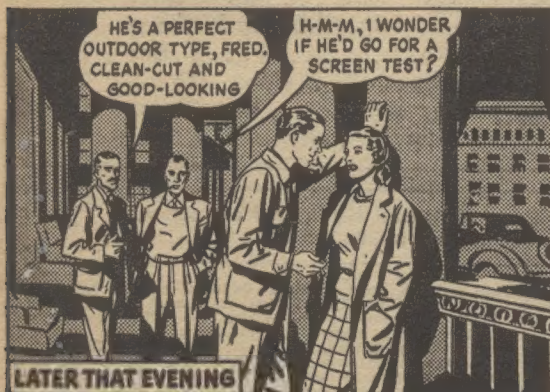
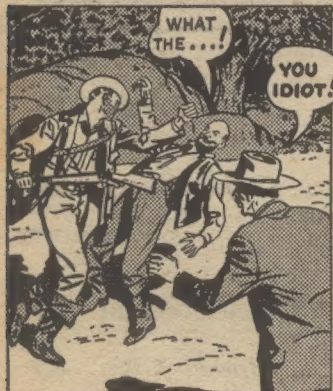
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NEXT ISSUE OUT AUGUST 31st!

FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

15 STORIES 25 CENTS

VOLUME 24, No. 3



SEPTEMBER, 1951

Two Big Novelettes

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2. **BLOOD, SWEAT AND SIXGUNS**.....*Joel Reeve* 94
Barber Talcott lathered his town with lead and shaved it with a Colt.
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Smashing Western Fiction

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● ON THE TRAIL ●



GREETINGS, pards. Right about here we thought you'd like a preview of George C. Appell's lead story for next issue. It's about a man called Ives who rode into the town of Maidstone looking for trouble . . . and found it. Why, the moment he tied up and pushed into the Twin Lamp Bar, he—but here's the way the author tells it. . . .

The back mirror was in jagged pieces that were punctured with frosted bullet holes. The bartender was just rising, egg-eyed and damp with sweat. A ponderously fat man was brushing sawdust from his baggy knees toward the rear. And closer, near the front, a small man in black broadcloth was turning back his cuffs preparatory to examining two inert figures on the floor.

A young man—about the new arrival's age—was leaning against the wall, breathing hard and clutching a torn sleeve. Stains were spreading onto his tight fingers.

The doctor moved to his work on the first figure, and presently shook his head and stepped to the other one. The fat man in the back finished brushing himself and poked through his vest for tobacco. He was well-dressed, despite his baggy clothes, and he looked well-fed. He found a cheroot, lighted it and sat down, watching the doctor.

The doctor rose and turned down his cuffs and buttoned his coat. "Marshal's dead too. Both of 'em . . . Pericol!" A Mexican boy

came around from behind the bar. "Take 'em out."

Perico bent willingly to his labor. He was paid a dollar a grave by the town, and he'd collected six dollars this week already. Two of them had been for marshals.

The doctor stepped across to the young man with the wounded arm.

The patient shut his eyes at the first cold thrust of the explorer, but when the bandaging started, he opened his eyes and saw Ives reflected in a fragment of back mirror. He saw a young man—twenty-five, maybe—braced lightly against the bar with the slender ease that comes from years of fine riding.

Ives took a last look at the patient, noting the un-lived-in face and the mouth that was not yet hardened by physical emergencies; then addressed himself to his drink.

"... The Monty's an' the Alldray's ought to settle this thing, once for all." The man next to Ives drank down, all at once. He asked Ives, "You wouldn't know about that?"

"No, I wouldn't."

The man poured. "Montgomery's got a spread out here—that's his kid with the shot arm—an' Alldray's got one borderin' on it. They got fence troubles." The man was talking under the impulse of nervousness, not from the desire to chatter.

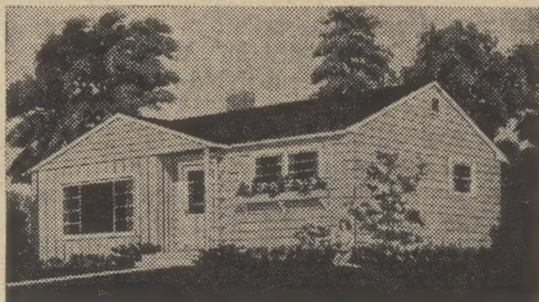
"So when they meet off the range, it's most

(Please continue on page 8)

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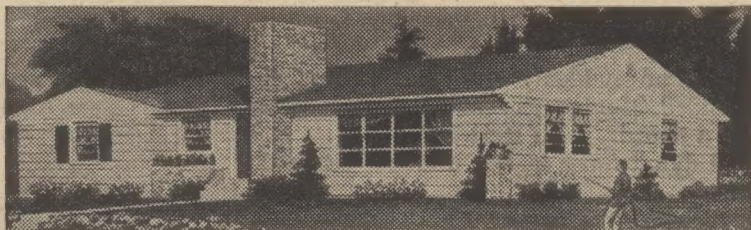


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(Continued from page 6)

allus the same." He curved a thumb to his shoulder. "The kid yonner says his daddy lost some cows, an' young Alldray—him who was carried out first—calls him to prove it, an' the marshal stepped in. Alldray threw on the marshal an' the marshal responded in kind, an' then we called the doctor. Young Monty took Alldray's slug after all, after it wandered through the marshal, like."

Dr. Jenney packed up, refused a drink from the fat man, and went out. Perico passed him in the swing doors and walked to the fat man and handed him a badge.

And the man next to Ives laughed. "Third time he's lifted that tin off a body this week."

THE metallic cry of wheels wailed up to the Twin Lamp and screeched to a stop in a slocking of brakes. The doors flapped open and a small girl with flashing green eyes and wild hair stamped in and thrust out her underlip, cocking her head left to right. She had a thin quirt in one hand, and suddenly she leveled it at the wounded Montgomery and held it on him like a sword. "You start it?"

"I didn't finish it, sis. Marshal got in the way."

"Where's the marshal?"

"Out with the other two."

She tucked the quirt under her arm and examined the bandaging. "Doc Jenney, by the neatness. You better come home."

Her eyes struck Ives with the hot impact of green fire. "You have anything to do with this?"

"No mum."

The quirt came out. "You mean that to sound funny?"

"No mum." He stared her down, stared through her; stared until the quirt dropped and the heat in her eyes flickered out.

"Not many people say no to me, mister."

"Ives." He put down his glass and bowed. "You'd be Miss Montgomery, I take it?"

"You try to take it, you'll get your face ripped open with braided leather." She shook the quirt at him. "This leather."

Everyone was laughing when she propeled her brother out. The wheels cut into the night and were gone.

The fat man was sucking thoughtfully on his gummy cheroot, blinking and spouting smoke. He made a gesture to Perico, and the

boy sauntered forward and tapped Ives on the arm. "Meest' Parsons." Perico wiggled his thumb that way.

Mr. Parsons was smiling fatly when Ives reached his chair. He said, "I wouldn't ruffle her hackles, stranger. She'll do what she says."

"Did I ruffle them?"

"Seems to me you tried. Ever been here before?"

"That'd come under the heading of personal business—wouldn't it?"

Parsons shrugged a heavy shoulder. "Like it here?"

"So far."

"That's good. I own it."

Ives relaxed a bit. "The saloon?"

"The town." Parsons shrugged again. "Mayor, guess you'd call it. What I wanted to say is, don't ruffle the citizens. We got troubles enough without workaways stirrin' up more."

Ives mouth stiffened. "Without what?"

"Without workaways." Parsons shook a stubby finger at Ives. "An' let me tell you something else—you won't get to sign on around here 'til the troubles are over. We got boundary troubles an' we got Merrow troubles."

"What's that—a hoof disease?"

Parsons beamed like a cat. "He's a bank buster. Him, an' Bran Branner, an' Sandy Grew an' Dockmeyer." The mayor's slumbrous eyes half-closed. "'Cept Dockmeyer, he's a rustler too, in addition to other things."

Ives said, "Seems to me you don't need riders here, you need a decent marshal."

"Like the job?"

And Ives grinned and said, "Sure. When do I start?"

"Right now." The badge flipped in a flashing arc and struck Ives on the chest. He caught it.

He didn't see Parsons' broad wink to the bar crowd, because he was facing around to Perico. The Mexican was stooping behind him, at his heels, pegging a tape measure there, and slowly extending it up his spine toward his head.

"For the grave, señor. I mus' know how long you are . . ."

You'll find the rest of this story in George C. Appell's "Death Runs This Town!" in the next issue—out August 31st.

THE EDITOR

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FAST GUN— FAST GRAVE

"Just pick up your
pistol. Last time,
Warfell!"



**Action-Packed
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Vengeance Lead**

Rancher Grant Warfel had two men to kill, that fog-shrouded night on the Hangrope Trail . . . the father of the girl he loved, and the biggest man in the valley. And both of them aimed to kill him—before they went gunning for each other!

CHAPTER ONE

Trouble on Hangrope

THE longer a man lives the less he learns, Grant Warfel told himself. He was freezing. When the Association war party came by the Teepees Ranch before daylight, he slammed a carbine into the boot, grabbed two boxes of .38 cartridges, and rode away in his summer jumper. It might still be summer down on the Mora, but here on the Hangrope Trail, at eleven thousand feet, the clouds were on the ground and the air was drizzly cold.

Clouds or fog? Two of the ranchers had argued about that mildly. Then the posse leader, Dave Knight, who had growled all day about too much talking, snarled at them to be quiet. Now, after two hours of waiting in a mist thicker than spider webs, the posse was on edge.

Little Ben Whipp, the Four Box owner, jammed his hands under his armpits and hunched his shoulders. "You're sure they're coming this way, Knight?"

Knight was trying to see down into the gulch, where the trail came up from Big Spoon River. "I told you what Boston Hellyer said." Knight was a bulge of a man, so wide he did not look his six feet. His stomach crowded the horn when he rode, but it was not fat. There was nothing soft about Dave Knight, even if he looked like a tub.

He was the only one of the eighteen men

By STEVE FRAZEE

without a rifle. It was Knight's boast that when he closed with Duke Broeger's bunch, it would be at sixgun range.

He said, "This is the place, according to Boston Hellyer. What do you say we take the association detective's word for it?"

"Don't bite at me," Whipp said. "I just asked."

Knight grunted. "Five times."

Twice, in Warfel's hearing. Warfel scowled. He looked through the mist at Knight. There were some men you just couldn't like. When the Mora Valley ranchers had formed the Association to try to do something about Duke Broeger, it was foregone that Knight was to be the wheel. He did not run the biggest layout, but it was the best. Knight was the kind who took charge of things without bothering with any puny gestures.

Perhaps a good many of the group here on the clammy mountainside resented Knight's leadership, Warfel thought, but they were all the same—it was easier to let some men be leaders than to buck them. Warfel started to walk away from the group.

"Where you going, Warfel?" Knight asked. Mist lay wet on his sandy stubble. He was still looking toward the trail.

"To see Frank Garland. Why?"

"Garland will be all right."

"I'm glad *you're* sure," Warfel said. He pushed through the trees, past the horses, and on to an overhanging rock where Greg Garland was kneeling beside his brother Frank.

The Garlands were slender and dark. They looked like twins, but Frank was three years older. He was lying on the ground with a yellow slicker over him and Greg's jumper under his head. The color of his face shocked Warfel.

"He can't move his legs," Greg said.

Frank's horse had slipped in the sliderock coming over Sorab Pass. He had jumped in time, but his high heels tripped him. He had fallen against a rock and broken his collar bone. Knight said they could not spare a man to go back with him. Frank said he did not want to return anyway. On this side of Sorab, his horse spooked when a grouse exploded from an Alpine fir.

The horse crashed off the trail into an old burn and began to buck. Sick with pain, Frank could not stick it out. He was dumped, and he hit with his back across a

log. His brother held him in the saddle, and they brought him on; it was closer than to a doctor in the mining town of Owl City than it was to help on the east side of the pass.

When they reached this place, where the trail forked off to Orient Pass, here where they were going to catch Duke Broeger's bunch with a drive of rustled cattle, Knight said no one could go on down the trail.

If they tried to take Frank Garland on down to Owl City, they might run head-on into Duke Broeger and ruin the whole play. It was logical, Warfel admitted, but as he stood there looking at Garland's bluish face, he decided that it was also a hell of a thing.

GREGG stood up. He was wound tight. "His back is busted," he muttered. "I wanted to take him back there in the slide-rock, but that damned Knight—"

"All of us made a mistake there," Warfel said. "When did his legs get like that?"

"Right after we took him off his horse, he said, but I didn't know about it until a few minutes ago."

They had not heard any cattle bawling, Warfel thought. In a fog like this the critters, pushed hard up the steep trail, would be protesting every time they could catch enough wind. That meant they were still a long way off. Boston Hellyer, the stock detective, had not been any more definite than "sometime Tuesday afternoon."

There was still time to take Frank Garland down. Warfel took off his jumper. He did not know whether Frank's color was caused by the injury or the cold, but he hoped it was the cold. "Get the horses," he said. "We'll tow mine, and I'll walk and lead yours. I'll be back as soon as I tell Knight." He added, "And the others."

Moisture flicked into Grant Warfel's shirt from every bough he brushed on the way back to the main group. Pardi, owner of the Diamond J, was talking.

"That Boston Hellyer *talked* an awful good job," Pardi said dubiously. "I don't know. Maybe Duke Broeger don't trust him."

"He was trusting him two nights ago," Knight said. "If you're getting chicken-hearted, Pardi—"

"I'll be here as long as you are, Knight!"

"Long Lee" Vessels, the Bent Pines owner, was hunched under a tree. His curly gray hair was pushing out from under his hat.

His face was pale from one of the headaches he suffered frequently above the eyes. One boot was off, and he was rubbing a heel that had been blistered raw during the walk through the worst of the sliderock.

Vessels was still the most unruffled of the lot. "We're here on Boston Hellyer's say-so. Let's go along until we know better. I sort of feel the same as Joe about that detective, but let's don't have no civil war about it before the main show. Let's loosen the cinch and take it easy."

"Yeah," Ben Whipp said, and glared at Knight.

Warfel wound his way through men sitting on the damp ground with rifles across their knees. He walked over to Knight, and said, "It's about a mile down to the Hidden Treasure mine, ain't it?"

Knight swung his heavy face. "Yeah." He was already suspicious of the oblique approach.

"You'd hear the herd bawling from the time they hit the main gulch, wouldn't you?"

"If everybody here hadn't been yapping all the time."

"We'd have heard them," Vessels said. "You figure on taking Frank in?"

"Uh-huh." Warfel watched anger pulse into Knight's face. "Me and Greg will take him down to the Treasure, then over the ridge to Owl City. He's got to go—and quick, and we won't be messing the deal up at all."

"Is he worse?" someone asked.

"He's bad," Warfel said. "All right with you, Knight?"

"No. You're not going to ruin this set-up for one man."

"I'm taking him in."

"I say you're not, Warfel." All the little tight lines of authority had come to Knight's face.

It was the sort of thing that would have needed no discussion, Warfel thought, but the circumstances of their being here were not ordinary. Out of respect for that he turned toward the watching men. "What do the rest of you fellows think?"

He saw approval of his plan on most of the faces peering at him through the mist, but he knew that few of the men would speak up. They did not like to be at odds with Knight. The Garlands were newcomers in the Mora country, and not yet fully accepted.

Vessels said, "I say take him down, Knight. I don't know how many Bent Pines cattle are in the bunch, but I'm willing to trade 'em for a man's life—even if I didn't think there was plenty of time yet."

Dave Knight shook his head slowly. "It ain't just a matter of this bunch of cattle. If we don't get Duke Broeger today, we may never catch up with him. All right, Warfel gets Garland down to the Treasure and over the ridge without meeting the gang." Knight shook his head again.

"That still leaves fresh tracks in the trail, and Broeger's no fool. Then, Warfel goes into Owl City, and two minutes later some of those hangers-on that look up to Broeger are sore-footing horses down the Big Spoon to warn him that something's up."

Vessels rubbed his forehead. "That's stretching things pretty thin, Dave."

"No," Knight said. "Broeger's got friends everywhere. One of them is going to wonder what put riders on Sorab Pass today—and another one is sure to know that Broeger is coming up the river today with a herd."

Warfel was already moving toward the horses.

"You're not doing it, Warfel," Knight said. It was not a threat, just a statement.

Warfel turned around, regretting the time already wasted. He tipped his carbine just a little, casually. "No one's going to stop me, Knight."

A layer of cloud rolled past Knight like smoke. When it moved on and left him only partly obscured by mist, he was standing with his hand on his pistol butt.

Grant Warfel cocked the carbine.

Vessels leaped up. His face went a shade paler, and he grabbed at his head as the quick movement almost blinded him with pain. "For God's sakes, fellows!" he cried.

He staggered into the line of fire between Warfel and Knight. Slowly, Knight took his hand away from his pistol. "Well," he said, "I guess that wrecks our plans for the day. In a few days Garland will be all right, but it may be a year before we get another chance like this at Duke Broeger."

Two men rose and went with Warfel to help put Garland in the saddle.

Warfel and Greg met no one on the Hang-rope Trail between the ambush spot and the Hidden Treasure mine. They cut over the ridge on the ore road and went on into Owl City.

Greg sat behind the saddle and held his brother upright all the way, and Warfel led the horse. Frank Garland was unconscious most of the way. The only doctor in town was at the Liberty Bell, taking off the leg of a miner trapped underground in a cave-in. Warfel went after him, and brought him back when the job was done.

THE miner died that night. Frank Garland died in a room in the Silver House the next afternoon. The doctor was matter-of-fact. Frank Garland was as good as dead, he said, one second after they lifted him into the saddle the first time. "You can't do that when a man has a broken back," the doctor told them.

Warfel went out and pushed his way across the walk, to stand near the rocky street. He had liked Frank Garland a lot, better than Greg, who did not quite measure up in some respects. Now Greg wanted him to break the news to Mina. That was all right, except that it was Greg's job.

Greg came out and joined him. Greg cursed Knight.

"You're wasting breath," Warfel said. "You heard what the sawbones said."

"I would have taken him back when he busted his collar bone, if it hadn't been for Knight!"

If it had been my brother, Warfel thought, *I would have taken him back in spite of ten like Dave Knight.* Maybe. What was the use of looking back? "Where you going?" he asked Greg.

"I'm getting drunk. When I have to ride up to the ranch behind that wagon and face Mina. . . ."

"No," Warfel said. "You're not getting drunk."

A light spring wagon from a livery stable stopped in the street. The driver spat a long stream of tobacco juice, and eyed the garb of the two men at the edge of the planks. "What room is the stiff in, cowboys?"

"The man is in Five," Warfel said. "We'll give you a hand, and then remember that you ain't hauling ore when you start down the road."

"I need a couple of drinks," Greg said. "Then we'll do it."

Warfel wanted a couple of drinks himself. He shook his head. "We'll do it now, and then we're leaving."

"You think you're Dave Knight himself,

don't you? Why didn't you show your toughness there in the sliderock?"

"Come on, Greg," Warfel nodded at the teamster.

They rode down the Big Spoon behind the wagon. It was drizzling rain. Clouds still shrouded the mountains. Greg was surly, taking it out by cursing Knight. Some men act instantly; others brood, then act, Warfel thought. Greg was the second type. For a while, for Mina's sake, Warfel tried to reason with Greg—and then he gave up.

Warfel just slumped in the saddle, and watched the wagon wheels dip wet sand. Once in a while the teamster turned to glance at the two riders. Warfel could not think of a single word to say to Mina Garland.

He noticed the cattle tracks in the road just below Mint Springs. Maybe a hundred and fifty head, he estimated, although the narrow road made it hard to guess. "I'll catch up in a while," he said. He turned his horse and went back to the springs.

At least a hundred and fifty head, he figured, when he saw what a spread the herd had made in the aspens above the springs. Eight riders had been driving the cattle. Warfel followed for a few hundred yards. Then he sat there in a wet saddle and tried to roll a cigarette with cold, wet fingers. After a while he let the mess drop down past the steaming shoulder of his dun.

He returned to the road, and took his time about catching up with Garland.

The herd had hit the road about three miles below Mint Springs. Cunning and boldness. A lot of wagons went back and forth to Owl City, and probably a great many men had seen the herd. "Sure we seen Duke Broeger's bunch," they would say, if questioned. "We didn't own a single cow in the herd." Miners were like that.

If Warfel and Greg had not stuck so close to the Silver House while they were in Owl City, they would have heard plenty about this. It would be very funny to some people when they found out that the Association war party had frozen most of the day on a mountain, while Duke Broeger took their cattle over a pass just two miles farther north.

Long before now more prime four-year-old stuff than men like Warfel shipped in a year would have disappeared somewhere into the vastness of Middle Park. Maybe Hellyer had slipped a little, or perhaps Broeger had

crossed him up. It could have been that.

And maybe someone had skinned out of Owl City right after Greg and Warfel arrived with Frank. Warfel was sure of the pick Dave Knight would make.

Greg did not look around until Warfel was almost beside him. "You know what Knight's going to say, don't you?" Garland asked.

The question needed no answer.

"That Broeger is just a little too smart for the whole bunch of us," Greg said.

There was something in his tone that caused Warfel to throw a keen study on him. The rain seeped into their clothes, ran from their drooping hat brims. They rode on behind the slow wagon that was returning Frank Garland to the 44 Ranch.

DAVE KNIGHT sat like a king in judgment at the head of his long table in the big room of the Fish Hook ranchhouse. And, like a king, he gave the impression of weighing everything before speaking. But Warfel knew that Knight had been framing his words since the moment Warfel led a horse down the Hangrope Trail.

Knight said to the Association, "Duke Broeger made damned fools of us—again, solely because one man defied the duly elected head of this group. As nearly as our first rough tally shows, the losses of that man were the least of any of us that day. Now—"

Lee Vessels said, "That's unfair, Dave."

Warfel was ready on his feet. "It's mighty plain, too, Knight."

Ben Whipp hammered the table with his palm. "This fighting among ourselves is just what Broeger would want!"

"Uh-huh." Knight's yellow eyes were steady on Warfel.

"Sit down, Grant," Vessels said coolly.

"I think we all misunderstood Knight."

"I didn't," Warfel said.

Knight's face did not relax. "I think you did, Warfel. The fact that Teepees lost fewer cattle that day is only natural, because you *have* fewer cattle than some of us. Therefore, you had less at stake when you violated my order and went to Owl City."

Warfel sat down slowly. "There was a man's life at stake. Greg and I had no way of knowing we were too late."

Knight shook his head. The wagon lamp above him put reddish glints into the bristles of his Prussian haircut. "This Association

must function as one. You did not follow orders, Warfel. You made it possible for a man to go from Owl City and warn Broeger that we were waiting for him. Boston Hellyer came in last night and told me that."

Warfel could feel the swinging-away from him. There was a tightening of brown faces around the table. Only Vessels continued to look from Knight to Warfel thoughtfully.

Knight said, "I'm requesting a vote to see whether Grant Warfel remains in this group."

Warfel leaped up. He looked at faces of men he had known for years. Few of them would meet his gaze. They would vote, he realized, one way or the other.

"Let's do it by a showing of hands," Vessels said mildly.

"Not on this," Knight said.

"Do it any way you want to!" Warfel said. "If there's no one here with guts enough to back what I did the other day, I don't want to be a member of the Association anyway!"

Greg Garland rose. "You didn't mention my name, but if—"

"We were coming to you," Knight said.

"Go right ahead with your two-bit politicking," Greg said. He followed Warfel out of the door.

Light from the bunkhouse windows showed the stringy form of old Zebe Andon walking across the yard. He was the oldest rider in the valley, a man who liked to know everything that was going on, and, unlike most of his kind, he usually did. He had been listening near the porch, Warfel was sure. But in spite of tricks like that, if Zebe said a thing, it was likely to be fact.

"Zebe," Warfel said.

The old rider stopped. "You boys were a little sudden, wasn't you?"

"Maybe." Warfel was not too keen about speaking before Greg Garland, but at least Greg had shown guts enough to get out before the two of them were insulted by an actual vote. They were more or less together now.

"You saw this Hellyer, didn't you, Zebe?"

"Yep!"

"Was he here last night?"

"Uh-huh. Right in the middle of the night. He came in soft, but I heard his steel-dust when he stopped down near the willows. I got up to have a look."

"Thanks, Zebe," Warfel said.

Garland and Warfel rode downvalley together.

"What was the idea of asking about the detective?"

"Just an idea. I wouldn't put it past Knight to lie a little to help make a point." Hellyer was real enough, all right. They had checked on him after he arrived, and there was no doubt that he had been sent out from the State Association.

"Knight's got two of us on his blacklist now." Greg was bitter. "I may do something about that big-mouth one of these times. I just might."

Greg might, at that, Warfel thought, but it would not be an open act. Not the way Frank would have done.

They came to where the road turned off to the 44 Ranch.

"You coming over?" Greg asked.

"Not tonight. Too late."

Warfel went on down the valley for a half mile, and then he turned and rode back. He staked out near the shortcut trail that led to Bent Pines. It was a two-hour wait before Vessels came along.

"Lee!"

Vessels peered toward the dark trees. "That you, Warfel?" he asked calmly, then waited for Warfel to come down on the trail.

"You flew your kite too soon," the Bent Pines owner said. "They wouldn't have voted you out."

"It was too strong just the same. Look, Vessels, from the time Frank got spilled in the sliderock until he really got bad hurt in the burn, I could see Knight was pleased about the whole thing. Just why has he got it in for the Garlands?"

Vessels' horse tossed its bit against the night. The Bent Pines owner was silent for several moments. "He never forgets," Vessels said at last. "Just him and me are left in the valley of the bunch that was here when we run Jack Garland out for rustling."

"Jack Garland—Mina's father?"

"Yep. We couldn't prove it, although there wasn't much doubt that Jack trailed a long rope. Knight was for hanging him. Some of us looked at the three little kids and the woman—and couldn't go that strong.

"We chased Jack. His wife had to take the kids and leave a few days later. The 44 was a good ranch, still is. Jack never let the taxes slide on it, even if he never came back. You know the rest."

The Garland kids had returned, last winter, almost twenty years later. They had brought in a herd and gone into business; and Frank had started pushing Fish Hook stuff off range that belonged to the 44.

"Would you figure that maybe Knight would have liked to have taken over the 44, that maybe that was why he was so blood-thirsty after Jack Garland?"

"Garland was a rustler, all right." Vessels paused. "There was some talk of the other."

"It's funny that a man who turned to stealing cows would bother to keep up the taxes on a ranch for twenty years."

"Jack did all right afterward, we heard."

"Doing what?"

"Rustling."

"He's dead?"

"Nope. He's Duke Broeger." Lee Vessels rode on up the trail.

CHAPTER TWO

The Gun-Son

WARFEL was cooking supper when he heard the horse galloping on the ridge trail. He went out in the yard with his mind tuned toward trouble. The gray burst down the ridge and crossed the creek in a shower of water. Warfel went back into the house. He booted a few sticks of scattered stove wood toward the box, and picked up some egg shells that had missed the box when he was cooking breakfast.

There was not much he could do to tidy up the place before Mina arrived. He turned the fried potatoes, and by that time she was in the yard. She came off the gray in a leap and was on the porch before he walked outside.

"Grant! I'm afraid Greg is going to start trouble!"

A little sooner than Warfel had expected. "Come in," he said, "and tell me about it."

She was a little flustered by his calmness. Her cheeks, flushed by the wind of her riding, started to pale, and quick Garland anger started to rise in her eyes. She was a woman on the chubby side, with a brown tone to her skin, instead of the lean darkness of the Garland family.

"He's left the 44 already," she said. "He's half drunk."

"Going up to see Knight, eh?"

She nodded.

"Come in," Warfel said. "He won't start anything till after dark."

She was brittle with rage in a second. She started to speak, and then she turned toward her horse.

"I'll go after him in a minute," Warfel said. "But let's both admit that Greg ain't Frank. He won't ride in on Knight and call for a showdown."

With her hand on the reins, she turned. All the fire went out of her. She nodded slowly. "I know what Greg is." She glanced toward the bunkhouse. "Your crew—"

"Strung out on Bustard Creek, all three of them. If Duke Broeger hits a few times more, I'll need only one." He watched her face. It did not change.

She drank a cup of coffee while he ate his supper. "He's been brooding ever since that day on the Hangrope," she said. "Tonight he got to drinking. He didn't say he was going to the Fish Hook, but I know that's where he headed."

Warfel gauged the light on the sage brush hills to the west. He had an hour and a half, at least.

"How many head have you been losing to Broeger?"

"A few right along. Why?" The name still didn't seem to mean anything to her.

A few. That's what Frank had said before the last raid. Greg had claimed a high loss after the Hangrope fiasco. Probably Greg had lied—and that meant he knew Broeger's identity.

"I just wondered," Warfel said. "Did your father stake you three to a start here?"

Color began to rise in her face. "He gave us the 44, yes. The cattle were Frank's. Look, Grant, my mother told me about my father's trouble in this valley years ago. That's all history now. My father is in Montana, where we left him, and he'll never come back here. He did want us to have the ranch, and he earned the 44 honestly."

"I wasn't prying out of idle curiosity, believe me."

"Why were you prying, then?"

Warfel pushed his plate aside. "I—I just wondered, that's all." He stood up. "I'll go after Greg. Don't worry about anything."

"That's easy to say. If there had been anyone else I could have gone to—"

Warfel took her by the shoulders and shook her gently. "I'll go right now, Mina. You know that anything you want from me

is yours. All you have to do is ask."

She smiled. "I'm sorry, Grant. I've been worried and upset."

They clung together a moment, and then Warfel put on his gunbelt and rode away. She did not know who Duke Broeger was, he was certain. But he was not sure that he had the nerve to tell her. It would be easier to drag Greg out of a mess than watch Mina's face when he had to tell her that the man indirectly responsible for Frank's death was her father.

How the devil had Lee Vessels known?

THERE were no fresh horse tracks in the road. Greg probably had swung high on the ridges. A half mile from Fish Hook, Warfel crossed over into the willows. A quarter of a mile closer to Knight's place and he cut Greg's sign, a short-gaited horse with a dented bar on the left fore foot, easy to remember from the hours Warfel had ridden behind the horse going up Sorab Pass.

Warfel grew uneasy when he saw how close Greg was going in, still mounted. In the high willows a hundred yards from the yard Warfel found an empty whiskey bottle. He left his horse there and went on foot.

It was dusk when Warfel wormed out of the heavy growth and saw Greg Garland lying at one corner of the breaking corral where it touched the willows. Garland was watching the yard, with a carbine resting across the poles of the corral.

Warfel drew his pistol, and then he returned it to the holster. This was going to be touchy, and if Greg suddenly saw him with a gun in his hand, the crazy kid might fire blindly.

"Greg!" Warfel called softly.

Garland jerked around, swinging the carbine across the willows.

"Greg, it's Warfel!"

"Oh!" Garland said in a long breath. He swung toward the house again. Dave Knight was coming through the door. Greg tensed and put the carbine through the bars again.

Yelling a warning to Knight, Warfel drove off his hands and knees and leaped toward Garland. Knight sprang clear of the light from the doorway, bounding toward the corner of the house. Greg shot hastily. The slug ripped splinters from the other side of the corral, then slammed into the house logs.

The carbine was still clashing in reload when Warfel landed on Greg's back. From

the corner of the house Knight sent two quick shots that ground into the poles just above Warfel's head.

"You damned fool!" Garland grunted hoarsely, still trying to work the carbine lever.

Warfel yanked the short gun from Greg's hands. He slammed Garland across the wrist with the barrel when the latter started to draw his pistol. The bunkhouse door banged back. Men were shouting questions at Knight.

Knight shot twice more. "The corner of the breaking corral near the willows!" he bellowed. "Get on 'em!"

"We got to run for it now," Warfel growled.

Bullets were splintering corral poles, whisking into the willows as the two men crawled back to the creek. They rose then and began to run. Greg stumbled. Warfel kicked him and cursed him for a drunken idiot.

"I knew what I was doing!" Garland said. "You messed things up proper!"

"Saddle up!" Knight's heavy voice rolled toward the hills.

Warfel and Garland reached their horses. They were flinging themselves into the saddle when a voice said, "You two? What the hell?" Zebe Andon was standing there, not ten feet away.

Greg tried to draw his pistol.

"Hold it!" Warfel snapped.

Andon was unarmed. He was old enough, and curious enough, not to be afraid of anything. "You fellows made a sneak ambush, did you?" he asked. "I seen Greg's horse come off the hill quite a while back, and—"

"It's not what you think it is!" Warfel said. "There's nobody hurt back there. Come on, Greg."

They stayed on the south side of the willows until they were out of Andon's hearing. Then Warfel led the way into the sage hills, and they doubled back on their trail. A half hour later they had reached the aspens. There were no sounds of pursuit.

Greg was still not sober. He kept rubbing his right wrist and cursing. "You fixed everything, didn't you?"

"You quick-triggered son!" Warfel said, and it was all he could do to resist knocking Garland off his horse. "We're riding straight to Bent Pines and we're going to tell Lee Vessels the straight of this."

It seemed to Warfel the only chance there was to get the truth around. Fish Hook would be out to shoot both of them on sight. Warfel had no desire to hide out.

"You go to Bent Pines," Garland said. "Fix it up so you're the big hero and I'm the skunk—"

"By Heaven, you are!"

"You run to Vessels with your story. I'll take care of myself, Warfel."

"You can't go roaming around until we get this thing settled. Everybody will be against you."

"Suits me." Garland roweled his horse, and broke away so suddenly that Warfel had no chance to stop him without shooting him. Straight up the hill Greg spurred.

Warfel whirled his horse and followed until the animal stumbled over a fallen aspen and went to its knees. Warfel felt it going down and unloaded. Branches whipped his face. He held his balance for three running steps, and then went sprawling headlong into underbrush. He was shaken, and violently angry, but unhurt.

He felt the horse for damage and found none. Far above him on the hill came the sound of cracking twigs. Greg Garland whooped wildly. Grant Warfel had a very good idea of where he was going—straight to his father.

Bent Pines or the 44, Warfel asked himself. First, he had better tell his story to Lee Vessels, and then he would tell Mina. He was getting sick of bearing nothing but bad news to the girl he loved.

VESSELS had trouble of his own. He had just come back from his high range, after discovering that Duke Broeger had nipped twenty head of choice stuff the evening before. The Bent Pines owner was in the middle of one of his brutal headaches. He was sprawled in a leather chair, with his wife keeping hot, wet cloths on his forehead.

In spite of all that, he grinned wryly.

"Some of old Dave's boys came by here," he said. "They had blood in their eye for fair. We can get you straightened out with them, but I don't know about young Garland. If he hadn't run, the worst he would have had to face was Knight. I don't think Knight would have the guts to gun him down."

Mrs. Vessels changed the cloth. Vessels

winned at the hotness. "Yes, he would too," he said. "That's just what Knight would like. It would put him one more step closer to getting the 44."

"Not if Grant marries Mina," Mrs. Vessels said. "He's waited too long now."

Warfel moved uneasily. "I guess I'd better get over there and tell her."

Mrs. Vessels smiled. "That you're going to marry her?" The Bent Pines owner's wife was a large woman. The corners of her eyes were crinkled from much laughing. Her face had been molded, but not lined, by early, rough years in the valley. "Is that what you mean, Grant?"

"I mean about Greg," Warfel said. He was learning a lot from the Vessels. They had been through bad times and good together, and now they would help him, but neither of them would make long, despairing faces about reverses.

"You stay here tonight," Vessels said. "I'll send a man over to tell Mina, and then tomorrow I'll get around and see some of the ranchers. There's nothing much to worry about—except Greg, and he'll always be a worry."

"But I ought to—"

"No use to get shot," Vessels said. "Knight would like that. It just might be that old Dave is getting mighty ambitious to expand his holdings, come to think of it."

Warfel sat down again. Vessels was right. Knight probably had a man or two waiting at the Teepees at the moment, and no doubt the 44 was being watched also.

"I feel better," Vessels said. He did not look any better. He blinked hard when he stood up. He went out, and when he returned a few minutes later he said that he had sent two men to the 44. "I told them to stay until Greg gets through gallivanting," he said. "Mina's going to need somebody to watch the cattle."

Warfel knew Vessels could not spare the men right now, considering the way Broeger was raiding. "I'll send Tod Hunter over tomorrow," Warfel said. "One of your men can come back then."

"Fair enough." Vessels sat down carefully. "We've got to stop Duke Broeger pretty quick, Warfel."

"You're sure he's Jack Garland?"

"I was in the Panamint Saloon in Owl City one day. Somebody said, 'There's Duke Broeger and his boys.' Half the joint rushed

to the windows for a look. Naturally, I was interested, too. The Cain boys, the Rincon Kid, Baldy Fairman, and three or four I didn't know rode by. Jack Garland was heading 'em, and he was the one they said was Broeger. Twenty years had made him a little leaner, and that was about the only change I could see."

Warfel nodded. "Mina doesn't know."

"I don't think Frank did, either."

"Does Knight?"

Vessels frowned. "He dropped something one day that made me think he did, but when I tried to edge around and talk about it, he shut up tight."

Lee Vessels had not talked because of the Garlands in the valley, Warfel thought. There were not many men like the Bent Pines owner. "What did you make of that Hellyer?" Warfel asked.

"Tough," Vessels said. "But awful loose-tongued for a detective. Still, I guess he got in with Broeger all right enough. He's been reporting back to Knight."

Warfel was trying to put something together, and it did not make sense.

"We'll work it out," Vessels said. He grinned. "We may all be broke by then, but we'll get her done, boy."

GREG GARLAND was gone eight days before he came in for the showdown. During that time Duke Broeger made one raid—on Fish Hook. Warfel found out all the details from Lee Vessels. Once again by night the stock detective had come in to Knight, carrying word of a large-scale raid on Ben Whipp's Four Box, the Window.

This time the drive, Hellyer said, was set to go over East Pass from Whipp's high range. The Association set the trap. The only difference between this time and Sorab Pass was that the day was sunny. Broeger came almost to the upper meadows of Fish Hook. He took four hundred head from Knight.

When Knight found out, he was so dangerous in his utter silence that men stepped wide around him.

Three days after that Greg came back to the 44 in daylight. Warfel and Mina were talking on the porch. Mina was saying, "The only thing he learned was to put his hand out and have it filled. It was a little different with Frank and me. Dad spoiled Greg

rotten, and then when it all started to bounce back, he grew harsh toward him and tried to undo everything he had spent years in doing. That made things worse. But Greg is still my brother, and—”

Tod Hunter came running from the corral, pointing toward the sage hills. Greg was on a different horse than the one he had ridden away. He was coming leisurely, and that was smart, Warfel thought, because the 44 had been watched constantly for a long time.

Garland rode into the yard. He leaned forward in the saddle, grinning, with both hands on the horn. “Got anything to eat around this fertile diggings?” he asked.

Warfel nodded at Hunter. “Get his horse out of sight, Tod.”

“Oh, so you’re giving the orders around here now, Warfel?” Garland swung down.

“Greg!” Mina said. “He’s been helping me all he could.”

Greg stood in the yard, uncertain for a moment. “I know. I’m sorry about that mess at Fish Hook, Grant. I was drunk, but that wasn’t all of it either. I suppose I should have gone to Vessels, like you said.”

He had not changed, Warfel knew, but yet there was a difference in Garland now, as if he had suddenly realized something about himself that he did not like. Something had jarred him pretty hard.

“I’ll get something to eat,” Mina said. She went inside.

Warfel stopped Garland on the porch. “You were with your father—Broeger?” Warfel asked in a low voice.

Greg’s eyes set quickly. “How did you know who—”

“Vessels told me.”

“Old know-it-all Vessels.”

“I want some facts, Greg. First, this Hellyer—”

Mina came back to the doorway. “Let’s all hear it.” She looked at Warfel. “You’ve been carrying something on your mind for quite a while, Grant. I was twenty-one sometime ago, so please don’t mutter behind my back.”

“Are you going to tell her, Greg?” Warfel asked.

Garland’s eyes shifted, and then they steadied bleakly on Warfel. “I’ll tell her.”

Between gulps of coffee Greg got it out. “Duke Broeger is our father, Mina.”

She turned white. “No! Dad’s in Montana. He said—”

“I just came from him. I was with him almost a week.” Garland was bitter. “He ain’t got much use for me now. I wanted to stay, but he wouldn’t let me. He said I was no good, or I wouldn’t have run out down here.”

Warfel asked, “You told him what happened?”

“I told him everything!” Garland rose nervously and poured himself more coffee. He glanced out of the window. “They watching the place? Well, it makes no difference.”

He sat down again, turning the coffee cup in his hands. “He was rougher than a cob, said I was a stinker. He said a lot of things. He told me to come back here and stand up to things—or clear out of the country.”

Warfel listened with eyes narrowed. Greg Garland was still a spoiled kid. He had run to his father, had been rebuffed, and he was not strong enough to rise to the understanding of it. Whatever he did now would not be based on a desire to face consequences, but rather with the attitude of “The old man’s going to be sorry now!”

“He wasn’t like he used to be,” Greg said. “He—”

“He didn’t listen to your whining and pat you on the back, like he used to, and tell you it was all right!” Mina said.

Instead of flaring up, Garland nodded. “I guess you’re right, Mina. I guess that was it.”

She changed in an instant, reaching out to touch her brother’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Greg.”

“What did he say when you told him about Frank?” Warfel asked.

Greg shook his head. “He turned gray, and then he shoved me aside and walked off.”

“He said nothing about Knight?”

“Nothing. He never mentioned his name.”

Warfel was sure it was because of Frank’s death and the circumstances surrounding it that Broeger had struck the Fish Hook so hard. There were facts swimming loosely in Warfel’s mind. He had to get them fixed.

“Did you see Boston Hellyer, our prime detective?”

Greg shook his head.

Tod Hunter banged on the door, then stepped inside. “I just now see Zebe Andon come to the top of the hills on Greg’s trail. Then he streaked for Fish Hook.”

"You'll have to slope, Greg," Warfel said. "Go to—"

"No. I'm through running!"

"Knight will be in here damned quick."

"Let him come," Greg said stubbornly.

Mina tried to argue with him. He was unmoved.

Warfel said to Hunter, "Get Vessels."

"I don't need no help," Greg said.

"You're tough." Warfel was disgusted.

"I might need help, though." If Knight had in mind what Warfel thought he did, Warfel was not fooling about needing help. "Greg, I want to know how to find your father."

"What for?"

"I want to know. I'm going alone to see him."

Garland's lips curled. "Oh, no, you don't pull that one!"

Mina said, "I'll go with him, Greg."

Garland looked from one to the other. "No tricks? Just the two of you, huh?"

"I don't know what Grant wants with Dad, but I know what I want. Just the two of us, Greg."

"You never did lie, Mina." Garland considered. "Go to the old Bar V Ranch in

Middle Park. There's a buffalo skull on the gate post. Turn it toward the house. Then wait."

CHAPTER THREE

Vengeance Valley

KNIGHT and eight Fish Hook riders came into the 44 yard just before sunset. Warfel went out to meet them. Three men put carbines on him and told him to back over against the bunk-house wall. Hunter had not returned from Bent Pines. Vessels' rider who had been helping Mina was twenty miles away in a camp on the high range.

"Don't make a mistake here, Knight," Warfel said.

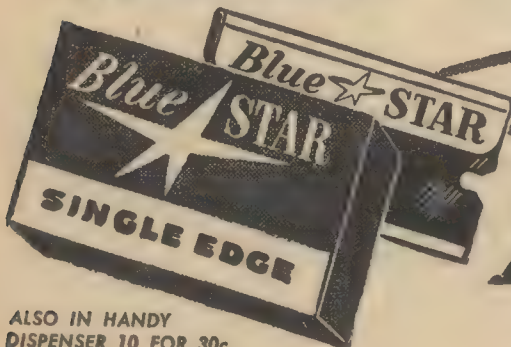
"I don't intend to." The Fish Hook owner swung down. Big and grim, half-smirking, he stood in the yard. He did not hitch his gunbelt. He made no gestures at all, except to glance at the windows of the house. "Take his pistol," he said to one of the men in front of Warfel. That was done.

"Go in and drag Garland out here,"

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Knight said evenly to those behind him.

"Never mind." Greg Garland stepped out on the porch.

Knight studied him an instant. "You look ready, Garland." The Fish Hook owner went for his pistol.

Warfel could not see everything at once. He watched Greg. He saw Garland, his pistol half drawn, jarred back by the shock of lead that knocked dust from his shoulder. Garland's hand fell away from his holster. He grabbed a porch post. He stared helplessly at Knight.

"That's enough!" Mina shouted from the doorway.

Knight's pistol blasted twice more. Greg Garland tried to hold to the post. The blankness of death rode across his face. He fell with his feet still on the porch and his face in the dust of the yard.

Warfel was grinding curses. He started forward. A man punched a carbine barrel into his chest and knocked him back. Warfel started again. The same man hit him in the forehead with the gun butt and knocked him to a sitting position against the bunk-house.

Blood came down into Warfel's eyes. He pushed himself up slowly, wiping his sleeve across his face. He saw Mina kneeling beside her brother. Then she leaped up and ran inside.

Warfel's voice came weakly. "That was murder, Knight. Those last two shots—"

"Murder?" Knight jerked his hand sideways. The men in front of Warfel stepped aside. "Toss his pistol on the ground in front of him."

Someone threw Warfel's gun eight or ten feet away from the bleeding man. Warfel wiped blood again and stared at the pistol. The barrel was half-choked with dirt.

"Murder?" Knight repeated calmly. "Like you and Garland trying to waylay me from my own corral? Pick up your gun, Warfel."

Warfel pawed blood from his eyes. He stalled a little longer, waiting for his head to clear. He would have to scoop up the pistol, tilt it quickly to spill that dust from the barrel . . . and he knew Knight would shoot him before he had the gun quite in his hand. The best chance was to grab the weapon, and drop flat.

"Pick it up," Knight said.

Warfel took a step. The shattering of glass from a window was like a pistol shot.

Mina's voice shook, but determination was threaded through it like a fine steel cable.

"You try to touch your pistol, Dave Knight!"

Knight did not look around.

"She's got a rifle on you, Dave," someone said.

"You know what to do," Knight said. "A woman that plays a man's game takes a man's chances. Pick up the pistol, Warfel!"

Warfel gathered himself for the leap. From the corner of his eye he saw two carbine barrels swing toward the house. "Mina," he said, "put the rifle down."

"No!"

"Send somebody in there to take it away from her, Knight," Warfel said. "And then—"

"Never mind that. Just pick up your pistol. Last time, Warfel!"

In a low voice someone said, "Six men coming!"

Knight did not look. His face was the color of hammered steel, his eyes pinpoints of hell. It was coming, in spite of the sound of hoofs.

Warfel stepped back against the bunk-house wall. "Go ahead, Knight. It will make a pretty picture."

Knight did not turn away until Hunter, Lee Vessels and four of his riders ploughed to a stop in the yard.

Vessels' voice was like a knife. "What I saw didn't look good, Knight. But then, you always did like all the odds on your side."

"What do you mean by that, Vessels?"

The Bent Pines owner dismissed. "Anything you care to make of it, Knight."

Warfel looked at the hawkish lines of Vessels' face, at the smile on it, and for the first time he realized that Lee Vessels was the most dangerous man in Mora Valley.

Warfel stepped out and picked up his pistol. A quick glance showed that Mina was still holding the rifle at the window.

Knight's color darkened. "I ain't got no quarrel with you, Lee." He turned away from Vessels.

"Knight!" Warfel dropped his pistol into the holster.

Knight tensed as he turned slowly to face Warfel.

It was there, what Vessels had said: Knight wanted the odds, and now he did not have them.

"Pick up your pistol, Knight."

The Fish Hook owner shook his head. He moved to his horse and rode out of the yard before any of his men were mounted. One of the men who had turned his carbine toward Mina was red in the face when he said to Warfel, "I was just going to try and shoot the rifle out'n her hands, Grant."

"Get out," Warfel said.

The rifle tipped across the window sill and fell into the yard. Two Bent Pines riders picked up Greg Garland to carry him into the house. "Dead when he hit the ground," one of them murmured.

WARFEL and Mina waited almost a full day at the abandoned Bar V ranch in Middle Park. Around them was a vastness of rolling hills that broke over into a thousand canyons at the edges of the plateau. Warfel had been in the country a few times before, but this time he appreciated the reasons why stolen cattle, once driven this far, were as good as gone.

Around noon, two riders who started to sweep past a hundred yards away, saw the buffalo skull had been turned toward the house. They came in carefully, a broad-shouldered youth and a middle-aged, bald-headed man who wore a ready grin.

They stayed for a bait of grub. They made small talk of the weather and of horses, and their eyes were quick. They thanked their hosts for the food, and rode away.

Duke Broeger—Jack Garland—came that evening.

He was on a clean-limbed, deep-barreled chestnut that made Warfel stare with envy. There was no mistaking Broeger—the Garland leanness and the dark coloring. He looked like Frank, but there was a tautness in his manner that had never been in Frank's.

Mina ran toward him. Warfel heard her say something about Greg, and then she was crying in her father's arms. Warfel walked away toward the spring that ran from a grove of stunted aspens on a hill behind the ruined corrals. He stayed there until Broeger called him by name about an hour later. Mina was walking away then, going toward one of the hills west of the house.

"So you and Mina figure to get married?" At a little distance, Broeger had looked like a young man, but now Warfel saw the lines and the gray at the temples.

"We figure on it," Warfel said.

Broeger studied him for several moments with the keenness of a wild animal assessing a threat. He nodded. "Good." He took a big-bowled pipe from his gray shirt and began to fill it. "You wanted to see me, Warfel?"

"You and Dave Knight had some kind of hookup, Gar—Broeger. I couldn't believe it for a long time, but now I think I got it figured out. You both had the same thing in mind, and you were both playing a game of make-believe with each other. You put it on the table when you made that last raid strictly on Fish Hook stuff."

Broeger put a match to his pipe. His black eyes glittered past the flame. "I'm going to clean him out to the last yearling before I kill him."

"Because of Frank and Greg?"

Broeger's face turned gray. The lines in it that would someday make his features a mask of bitterness were stark and ugly. "Yes. And because of twenty years ago. Knight and I were rustling together. Lee Vessels started to catch on, so Knight switched the blame to me quick. If he had had his way, I would have dangled on a rope.

"He wanted the 44 even then. He still does. When I came back here to see that my children got a square deal in the valley, I bumped into Knight in Owl City one day. For a minute I considered gunning him, but he talked fast. We made a deal. I was to bleed the valley white, until everyone was ready to quit. He was going to help by misleading every war party. Then Fish Hook and the 44 would share everything in the valley."

Broeger laughed. "Pretty, wasn't it? Two crooks drinking whiskey and making a deal, each figuring to doublecross the other when the chores were done. We played the game for a while. I figured to see that 44 got everything but Bent Pines in the end. Vessels was my only friend twenty years ago. Knight figured to take the whole works.

"Sure, I hit Bent Pines a couple of times, but only to make Knight think I was going along with him. My kids were not going to know how it came about that 44 wound up the big spread. Only Greg, the weakest of the three." A sort of sad bewilderment lay on Broeger's face. "I wanted them fixed for life, Warfel . . . and now I've got only one left."

It was Broeger's own fault, Warfel thought. He had pulled his family into a high-rolling game for stakes that he wanted them to have, not considering what they might want. But Warfel could not hold deep anger against the man, only pity. He kept thinking of Knight on the Hangrope the day Frank Garland was dying, of Greg Garland sagging away from a porch post, when he could have been left to live his weak, impulsive life.

Broeger was an outlaw, but a man in his own way. Knight was evil at its rotten worst.

"I've made trickier deals work out," Broeger said. "But this time I killed my own boys." He was old right then, stripped of wildness, stripped of everything but self-condemnation.

Reluctant to look on grief, Warfel veered to another subject. "How did you keep Knight informed?" Warfel still had to protect Boston Hellyer.

"I rode in myself." Broeger came from a long way off. "It was supposed to be done by a stock detective. I didn't favor that. Knight insisted. Said it would make things look better." The puckery flesh under Broeger's eyes tightened. "The detective lasted one night, Warfel. The Rincon Kid knew him when he rode up. I couldn't stop that either."

"You rode his horse to the Fish Hook?"

Broeger nodded.

That explained Zebe Andon's statement. With Zebe, seeing a horse was just as good as seeing the rider himself.

"You're quitting the country?" Warfel asked. He glanced at Mina out on a hill.

"After I clean Knight to the bone. Then I'll kill him."

"What about Mina?"

"I asked her to leave the country until it's over. She won't. I'm hoping you'll protect her, Warfel. I can't stop now before I'm through with Knight." Broeger glanced toward his daughter. "It would be done if Knight had taken the chance you gave him the other day at 44. But he always wanted the best of things, and neither you nor I will get a fair crack at him again for a long time."

"For Mina's sake, why don't you drop this thing now, Broeger? I'll take care of Knight."

"I'll be there first."

Stubborn, willful, vengeful, Warfel thought. Well, Broeger had cause for the last.

"There's just one more thing," Broeger said. He went to the chestnut, and returned with a package wrapped in butcher's paper. "Here, Warfel. The easy-to-carry. It will cover everything you, Pardi, Whipp, and Vessels have lost, with some left over for the 44."

Warfel stared. "I've never heard of a thing like—"

"You wouldn't have, if Baldy Fairman hadn't brought the word that one of the pair waiting here was a girl. I knew it was Mina. Take the money, Warfel. I make ten times that much in a good year."

Broeger glanced at Warfel's beaten range clothes. "Do you ever find it tough to be honest?"

"Not too tough, Broeger." Warfel took the money.

"I admire an honest man. I really do. But I don't care to be one." Broeger started toward his horse.

"Just one more thing, Broeger. Your personal feud with Knight is your own business, but when you rustle cattle in the valley, even Fish Hook stuff, that's makes it everybody's business. I'm against you there, Broeger."

The rustler smiled. "Fair enough. I do admire an honest man. I'll try to keep clear of your front sight, son."

He went up on the chestnut in an easy leap. He sat a moment looking toward Mina, and then he galloped away.

WHEN Mina came in, she gave Warfel a dark Garland look. "He's still my father, Grant."

"When he comes into the valley he's a rustler, and then I can't remember that he's Jack Garland."

"But it's only to settle an old score with Knight! He told me he wasn't going to touch anyone else's cattle."

Broeger had not told her everything, not about his deal with Knight, Warfel realized.

"He ruins Knight and moves on," Warfel said. "I'm not against that, but—there's a good many gangs in this park, and if Broeger gets clean away with coming over the hill to rustle, after he quits, another bunch will step right in, figuring that they've been overlooking an easy mark."

"I'm riding against him, Mina, anytime

he comes over the mountains to steal cattle."

"It won't be *your* cattle!"

"That makes no difference."

"So you'd shoot my father for trying to ruin the man who killed my brothers!"

"No! For rustling cattle."

"They won't be Teepee stuff, or Bent Pines, or—"

"Let's go home." Maybe in time she would see it his way, he hoped. If she did not . . . Well, a man had to do what he had to do.

"He's still my father," Mina said, when they were riding away. This time it was a warning.

CHAPTER FOUR

Rustlers' Reunion

WARFEL went straight to Bent Pines after seeing Mina home. He waited until evening before Vessels rode in. Vessels saw that some urgency was pushing Warfel, but he said that they would eat first, and then talk.

After supper Vessels stalled some more, building a fire in the fireplace. He smiled at Warfel's impatience.

At last Vessels sat down. Warfel gave him the packet of currency, and told him of the talk with Broeger. Vessels said nothing for several moments. He counted the money. "He certainly isn't short. Before we pay off, let's get a final estimate of losses from everyone, excepting Knight; and then we'll tell them about the money."

"We've got Knight cold," Warfel said.

"Have we?" Vessels stared at the fire. "Jack's word is good with me, but it will mean little to Pardi and Whipp and the others."

"But the detective—"

"Who's going to prove the Rincon Kid killed him?"

"I'm satisfied," Warfel said. "I'm going to Fish Hook tomorrow morning. I'll call Knight out—"

"You'll never get in the yard." Vessels shook his head. "I know. That would settle a lot for you. With Knight dead, Duke Broeger is through. He leaves. Mina has nothing against you then."

"How did you guess that?"

"I know you both pretty well," Vessels said gently. "You know that Garland—"

Broeger—has to be stopped, or else we'll have other gangs coming in here. And Mina knows that he's her father." Vessels leaned forward. "Suppose he was your father, Grant?"

Warfel had thought of that too. He had seen Mina's point, but she had not seen his. "The trouble is, we're both right," he said miserably.

"I'm afraid so," Vessels agreed mildly.

"After we catch Broeger, we can deal with Knight."

Vessels smiled. "Don't make it too easy, son. But you're right. Broeger is only a man, and I don't think he knows this country as well as you and I. He won't make a mistake, but you and I will get a hard line on him sooner or later. Then we'll have to call in the others, including Fish Hook.

"Patch up some kind of peace with Knight. Attend the Association meetings—there's one tomorrow night at the Window—say nothing to anybody about what we know. We have to use Knight for bait until we get Broeger."

Vessels rose. "You need some sleep, Grant, but first, I want you to count this money, and then I'll put it away until after the show-down."

"All right." Warfel was thinking that it would be easier to make a peace of sorts with Knight than to make peace with Mina, after he helped kill her father.

Every avenue that seemed to be an out-always ended against the same cold block—Duke Broeger's gang must be crushed and broken, or else the valley, free of rustler trouble for twenty years, would be raided constantly by long-rope outfits from Middle Park.

"You and I can do it," Vessels said. "We'll work by our lonesome until we set it up, and then this valley will prove that it won't be fooled by men like Knight, or stolen blind by any bunch of toughs from the Park."

GRANT WARFEL thought he knew the Mora country well, but in a week he admitted that Vessels knew more about it than Warfel might ever learn. They scouted day and night. They watched the trails. They became rustlers themselves, in every detail but the act. They watched Fish Hook herds and planned how they would steal them, if they were Duke Broeger.

They slept in fireless camps, ate cold ra-

tions, studied every horse track they found. Sometimes they rode all night to be in vantage points at daylight, from which they could watch large sections of the range. The week passed, and there never was the least sign that Broeger was planning a raid.

"He may lay low for another week, maybe longer, to make Knight sweat," Vessels said.

They had seen that Knight was doing everything he could to protect his cattle. He had tried to borrow men from Whipp and Pardi, but they saw no reason why Broeger would concentrate on Fish Hook—and Knight could not tell them.

Warfel had made a sort of truce with Knight. The Teepees owner had attended the last Association meeting, and Mina had closed the door in his face the next day when he went to the 44. There was a deep pondering behind Knight's eyes when he looked at Warfel during the meeting. If the Association ever did catch up with Broeger, Warfel was sure that he would not ride in front of Knight.

At the end of the week Vessels went back to the valley for news. He returned the next day to report that one of Whipp's riders had seen two men sizing up scattered bunches of cattle on Window range on Little Beaver Creek.

"A quarrel broke out over that," Vessels said. "Whipp and Pardi wanted to concentrate on Little Beaver. But Knight knew what we know—Broeger is only making a fake pass, but still Knight had to send part of his crew over to help in case there was a raid. If he didn't, he knew he wouldn't get no help when *he* needed it." Vessels shook his gray head. "That Broeger knows how to make him sweat, all right."

Vessels was right. It was almost three weeks before Broeger made his play. It started with a raid on the Diamond J park range. Vessels and Warfel did not know till afterward about the diversion. They had been concentrating on the East Fork of the Big Spoon, where they had finally glimpsed Broeger making a scout. That was Fish Hook range, the best that Knight controlled.

It was also exposed country. A rustler drive from it had to cross the Owl City road, and then go up the Mint Springs route—or Hangrope Trail.

From a juniper-studded knob, where they had been dry-camped for twenty-four hours,

Warfel and Vessels watched Broeger and two men whom Vessels said were the Cain boys ride leisurely up the road toward Owl City.

"They'll hit tomorrow morning," Vessels said. "Want to bet a new hat?"

"They'll use the Hangrope," Warfel said. "It's the fast way, and they know they're going to be pushed hard this time. Want to bet a new horse?"

Vessels grinned. "You'll need one, after the ride you're making tonight. I'll be waiting on Hangrope, at the old stand."

Warfel looked over his shoulder at the mountains. "There'll be another mess of fog up there tomorrow."

"Clouds, not fog."

WHICHEVER it was, you could make a swipe through it with your hand and almost see the mark. Warfel was wearing his sheepskin this time, with his pistol in the pocket.

Down the Hangrope he heard the first bawling of the herd. At fifty feet a man could not see a horse. Tod Hunter was on Warfel's right, somewhere in the rocks. Pardi was on the left, in the trees. He had argued bitterly with Knight about being left here. Knight's group had stayed above the trail and walked on down toward the Hidden Treasure.

Six men here. Three on this side of the trail; Vessels and two of his riders on the other side. Knight's group was supposed to be a quarter of a mile below. They would let the herd and riders pass before starting it. It was a better plan than last time, Warfel thought, although the ranchers had fewer men now.

Last night when he reached the valley, only one man had returned from the war party chasing nothing on the Diamond J range. That man had reported that the rustlers had turned the cattle loose after driving them six miles. There had not been time to go after the group still investigating.

Unconsciously, Warfel tried again to brush the murk away from his face. The herd was getting closer. He called to Hunter in a low voice. "Yo!" Hunter replied. He was about fifty yards away.

"Pardi!" Warfel called. Pardi did not answer. Maybe he was not there. Maybe he had slipped on down with Knight's bunch. Pardi had said angrily, when told to stay here, that all the shooting would be below.

Maybe he was still here, and was scowling because Warfel had called out, when the herd was getting closer all the time.

It had not been too smart, at that, Warfel thought. Broeger was an old hand. He might have sent someone ahead to scout the trail.

Warfel crouched in the fog, with his carbine ready. It did not matter whether he was here or below. When they got Broeger, it would be all the same to Mina Garland.

He gauged distance by the sounds of the cattle. By now they must have passed Knight's bunch. He went tense as the quick steps of a horse sounded on the trail. They stopped. The horse blew. Warfel cocked his head, his eyes narrowed, straining to see through the gray layers.

After a time there came the soft slap of a man's hand against the neck of the animal. Frank Garland used to do that, after each stop to let a horse get its wind. The horse came on, quick-stepping, powerful.

One of Vessels' men, on the other side of the trail, could not stand the tension. He called out softly, "Knight?"

"Bill," the rider said calmly.

There was no Bill with the Association today. There were two Bills with the group scratching their heads at the trick on Diamond J; but the man on the horse could not have known that. He knew all he needed. He turned his horse and went back down the trail at breakneck speed.

One of Vessels' men cut loose with a six-gun.

"You fool! You fool!" Vessels cried.

As if the shot were a signal, firing broke out from down the trail. Pistols and carbines were chopping the fog down there, crashing their echoes against peaks that Warfel could not see. It was not long before the cattle arrived, lunging up the trail, slipping, bellowing.

Warfel got as close as he could, taking shelter behind a tree. Steers came out of the fog like ghostly hulks. Some broke from the crush of the narrow trail and banged against the tree. A wild-eyed cow saw Warfel, and tried to hook him with her horns. He went around the trunk. The cow slashed bark and broke a horn, and then, still bawling, she crashed off into the trees.

There were no riders with the critters now. They had broken back toward the Spoon, Warfel figured, or they had been cut down by Knight's party.



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Warfel had to leave his post close to the trail and get farther back in the trees. It was then he heard the horse, above him. Someone was going around this ambush spot. He crouched and listened. A man was leading the horse, taking his time.

Warfel angled upward, staying on the damp needles, peering hard as each step made another yard of country visible ahead. He stalked the sounds like an Indian. They stopped suddenly, except for the blowing of the horse. The man said, "Baldy! Baldy!"

Where two large firs were jammed side by side, Warfel crawled under the branches. On the other side, not twenty feet away, was Duke Broeger. One arm was hanging limp. His hand was dripping blood. Across the saddle of the chestnut he had been leading was the bald man who had been so pleasant, and watchful, when he talked to Warfel and Mina in Middle Park.

While Warfel watched, with his carbine cocked and bearing on Broeger, the man slipped from the saddle. One glance told Warfel that the fellow was dead. Broeger knew it too. He shook his head, looking down at the man, and then he put his good hand on the horn and started to mount.

"Hold it right there, Broeger!" Warfel crawled the rest of the way from the trees.

"Drop your gunbelt."

Broeger was set like thin, bent steel. He turned without haste. For a long moment there was doubt that he would obey. "I do admire an honest man," he said, and unbuckled his gunbelt with his left hand.

WARFEL went forward when the gunbelt hit the ground. "I wish to hell you'd cleared out when I told you to!"

Broeger smiled. "Looks that way, don't it?"

Suddenly his eyes, looking over Warfel's shoulder, glittered so savagely with dark warning that Warfel knew it was no trick. He jumped sideways, turning. A pistol blasted. Dave Knight had come from the trees. He moved his gun once more toward Warfel.

Warfel fired the carbine from his hip. He saw Knight take the slug, and Knight seemed frozen where he stood. Warfel worked the lever desperately, but he would have been too late if his first shot had not counted.

All the arrogant stiffness left Knight suddenly. He was a loose mass, dead where he stood. His knees jerked out and he fell on the needle mat.

When Warfel looked at Broeger again the rustler had retrieved his gunbelt. His pistol was in his hand. "I'd say you robbed me of a job, Warfel." He looked at Baldy. "A bad day. They happen in this business. If they had come on ahead..."

Broeger put the pistol in its holster. He dropped the gunbelt again. "I guess I've done enough to Mina."

Somewhere out in the trees and fog Hunter shouted Warfel's name. Across the trail, one of Vessels' men yelled a warning not to shoot, that Knight and Vessels had crossed over.

Warfel stared at Broeger—Jack Garland. The man could have escaped when he first came scouting up the trail; he must have smelled out traps like this before. He must have sensed that his bunch was cut off below, but he had gone back. And he had tried to take Baldy away, even when the man was dying. Knight was done, and that finished Broeger's work here.

Warfel gestured with his carbine toward the chestnut. "Get out, while you can."

From the trees behind Warfel, Vessels said in a conversational tone, "I was wondering when you were going to say that, Grant." He looked at Broeger. "Hello, Jack."

Broeger could not strap his gunbelt. He wrapped it around the horn after he was in the saddle.

"I see you got a saddle gun there, Jack," Vessels said. Warfel had overlooked that. "You must have killed Knight, didn't you?"

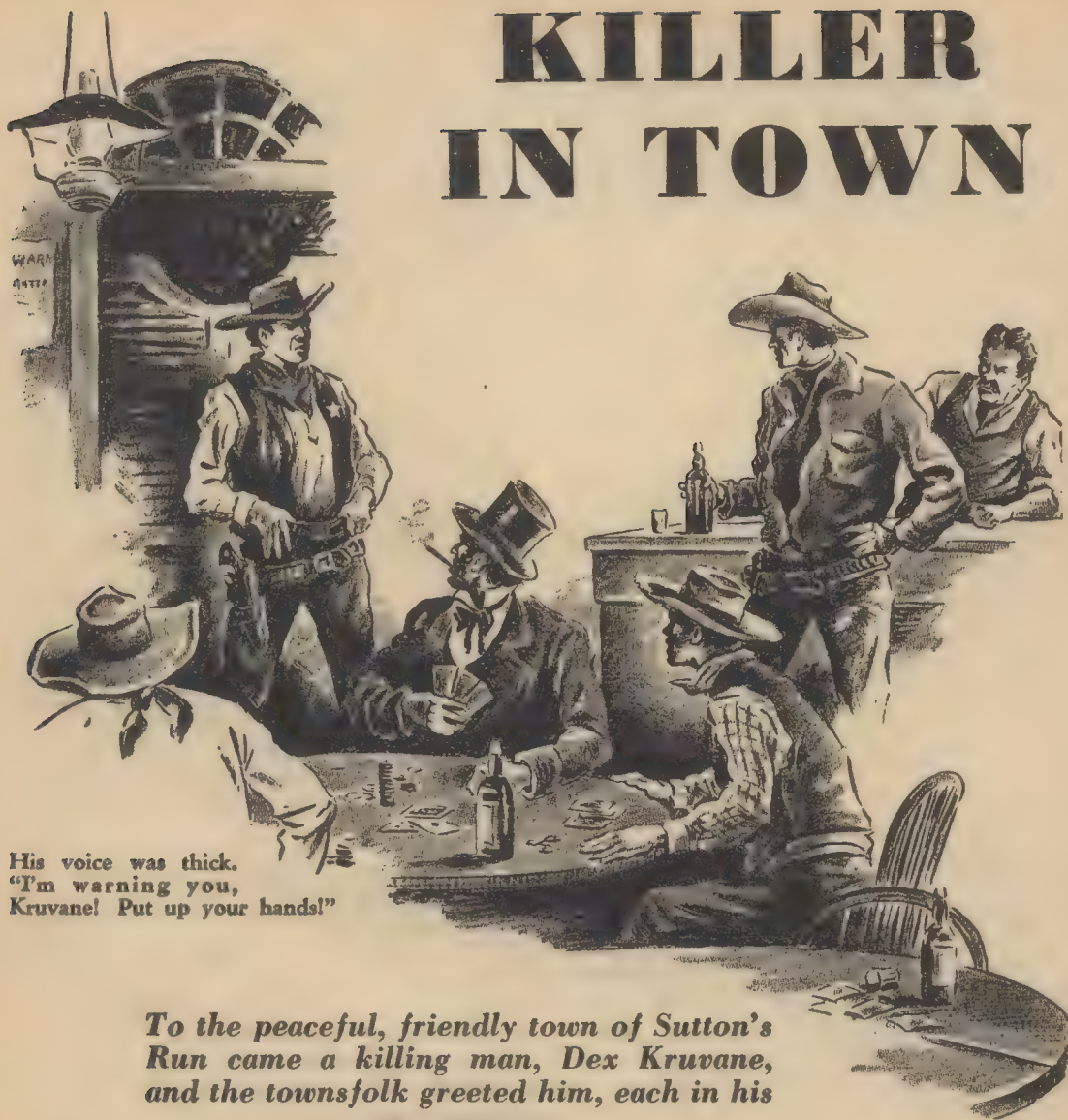
"I can stand that, all right, Lee."

Vessels nodded. "I knew what Knight was after when I saw him take a sneak this way." He looked at Warfel. "We won't have to tell the truth about Knight, will we? There might have been some good in him—somewhere."

"I admire him now," Broeger said, and rode away.

"Well, Warfel," Vessels said, "for once, you can carry good news to Mina. Tell her enough, but not too much." He grinned. "She might start a fight because you didn't bandage her father's arm, and give him your horse for a spare. Never tell a woman everything, Warfel."

KILLER IN TOWN



His voice was thick.
"I'm warning you,
Kruvane! Put up your hands!"

To the peaceful, friendly town of Sutton's Run came a killing man, Dex Kruvane, and the townsfolk greeted him, each in his own manner.

A MOMENT before, the raucous comments of drinkers at the bar, the click of poker chips and the occasional scraping of a chair had created a small tumult of sound.

Now the drinkers were silent and cards lay undrawn on the green felt-topped tables. Kruvane had just walked in. Dex Kruvane, the outlaw from Four Fords River, the killer on the run.

He stood just inside the edge of the arc of glare from the nearest overhead kerosene

lamp, dusty and sweaty and obviously saddle-weary, and slowly surveyed the smoky room with his dark eyes as if he wanted to stamp every detail of it into his memory. His heavy, tightly buttoned riding jacket gave him a bulk which belied his slight frame.

When he walked toward the bar, they could see how tired he was. His feet dragged, his shoulders slumped forward. He gripped the edge of the bar and for a minute stood hunched there with his head hung down, as

By JOSEPH PAYNE BRENNAN

if he were trying to gather strength.

Word had come in that he had barely escaped an ambush on the malpais east of Corner Buttes. Apparently the sheriff's men had given him a smart chase afterwards.

Supplied with a tequila bottle, he threw down three drinks as fast as he could pour them, his tumbler brimming over onto the polished bar. Some of the liquor dribbled down his corduroy riding coat.

Astute observers noticed the unsteadiness in his movements, and the lack of exact co-ordination, but when he turned from the bar with his right hand hanging loose by his thigh-thonged Colt .45, eyes jumped back to the cards, to the pile of poker chips, to the floor—anywhere but on a line with his own.

They could feel his eyes on them, all of them. The curious intensity of his brooding gaze was disturbing. They called for cards in thickened, lowered voices, their throats suddenly gone dry.

Drinkers at the bar stared into their drinks, or into the bar mirror, uneasy and apprehensive. A few loungers drifted unobtrusively toward the worn swing doors.

There wasn't a man in the room who wanted to tangle with him. Marshal Bligh was away on county business, and probably would not have interfered even if he had been present. What transpired in Four Fords River was of little import in Sutton's Run. So long as Kruvane stayed peaceable, the chances were nothing would happen.

He swallowed another drink and seemed to relax a little. Pulling out a grimy bandanna, he wiped some of the alkali dust from his face. The dust clung in the lines of his face, accentuating them, and the smeared uneven residue of dirt made his appearance worse than before, gray and gaunt and cadaverous, as if he were all but drained of blood. He looked at the man standing nearest to him at the bar, as if he wanted to talk, but that drinker scrupulously avoided his gaze, and so he turned his back to the bar and stared searchingly around the room.

The poker players studied their cards more carefully. The unoccupied loungers took a sudden interest in the worn spot on the knee of their levis, or gave particular attention to the kerosene lamp nearest the swing doors, which smoked a little as sporadic gusts of air blew against it.

"Drinks on me! Line up!" In the tense silence, Kruvane's voice made some of them

jump. But there was no hesitation. In less than a minute the poker tables were deserted. The bar was filled, two deep.

AFTER some little time, when the glasses had finally been filled, a brief uneasy interlude ensued. Kruvane ended it abruptly.

He raised his glass. "Here's to Sutton's Run!"

It was a good toast, and one they had not expected. There was a roar of approval and they all drank.

But the tension was only momentarily broken. When the glasses were set down, the barrier of Kruvane's reputation went up again. Some of the drinkers remained at the bar, toying with their glasses, others edged cautiously back toward the tables.

Kruvane's isolation appeared complete, and the sardonic smile on his drawn face, half-bitter and half-amused, indicated that he sensed it.

He turned his head, eyes narrowing with instinctive caution, as someone began pushing through the crowd toward him.

The man moved slowly, hampered by a crippled leg, but his massive torso and huge knarled hands indicated tremendous strength. His small shrewd eyes studied Kruvane as he shoved along the bar.

Kruvane stiffened. The drinkers on both sides of him melted away.

The cripple stopped a few feet away. He nodded. "Name's Corby. They call me Jits."

He slapped a gold eagle on the bar. "Fill up here!" He indicated Kruvane's glass.

He hooked his twisted leg onto the brass foot rail. His eyes studied Kruvane's, speculatively. He appeared to be puzzled by something he saw.

"Heard about you," he said. "But I never believe half what I hear. You did a favor for a friend of mine once. Henry Todd."

Kruvane lost some of his tenseness. He reached for his filled glass, nodding. "I remember. That was back in Junction City, three, four years ago. What happened to old Henry?"

Jits scraped his chin. "Checked out last winter. Rheumatiz, I hear tell."

Kruvane nodded absently. "What's your line here, friend?"

Jits spread his huge hands. "Blacksmith. Keep me pretty busy what with—"

He broke off and turned at a sudden thrumming of the swing doors.

"Kruvane in here?"

The query was snapped out like the crack of a whip. There was no friendliness in it. Everyone in the room looked quickly toward the doors.

The young man who stood just inside them looked immature, boyish almost, but his tense scowling face mirrored determination. There was an intensity about his features which suggested ambition and a complete lack of humor. Pinned to the front of his vest was a deputy marshal's star.

Nearly everyone in the room recognized him. His name was Charlie Hesson and he had been appointed temporary deputy in the absence of Marshal Bligh. Not many of the townsfolk had taken the appointment seriously; some of them had considered it a harmless joke. Charlie had always hankered after a star, and some weeks before, after months of pestering on the part of Hesson, Marshal Bligh had promised to let him take over the next time he himself was absent from town.

Now the townsmen stared at his grim

young face in sudden shocked surprise, belatedly aware of the mistake which had been made. Most of them had actually forgotten about his deputation.

With his curt query still ringing in their ears, they turned to look at Kruvane.

JITS CORBY had edged out of the way and now Kruvane straightened up at the bar. His voice was low, almost inaudible to those at the far end of the room. There was weariness in it, and a kind of resignation.

"I'm Kruvane. What is it, boy?"

Charlie Hesson's scowl deepened. "You're wanted by the law, Kruvane, and I'm here to take you in. You coming?"

He stood tilted forward, with his right hand inches away from the walnut butt of his .45.

Kruvane met his frowning gaze steadily. The harsh lines of his face deepened and his jaw jutted outward. The pallor of his dirt-smear'd countenance became more pronounced.

His voice was soft, and there was a sort of reproof in it. "I'm peaceable, boy. Drink-

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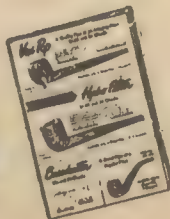


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in' quietly an' talkin' with a friend. Come off it."

Charlie Hesson flushed angrily. He considered he was being humiliated in front of the townsfolk. Not to be taken seriously was an unforgivable insult. His egoism had been seared, and a bitter rage built up within him.

His voice was choked and thick. "I'm warning you, Kruvane! Turn around and put up your hands!"

Kruvane sighed. He shook his head ever so slightly, his dark eyes never leaving Hesson's. "Stand away, kid, and I'll ride on out—peaceable, like I came."

For a moment Hesson hesitated. He muttered, "Damn you, Kruvane!" and his hand jerked toward his gun.

He had it unholstered, and the hammer flipped back, but before he could get it leveled, something spun across the room and smashed him in the belly. His gun roared, the slug biting into the lower panels of the bar, and then he was down on his back, groaning in agony, both hands grabbing at his gut.

Kruvane bounded forward, kicked at the deputy's dropped gun, missed, kicked again and sent it sliding toward a corner.

The maneuver seemed to send him off balance. He staggered wildly, clutched the bar and leaned his weight against it, breathing heavily.

He stared down at Hesson, writhing on the floor. The tequila bottle which he had hurled lay nearby, its amber contents making a dark stain on the floorboards.

Kruvane's breath came in short gasps. He looked around at the tense knot of men and a new and deeper bitterness seemed etched into the weary lines of his face. His eyes were abnormally bright, as if the liquor had affected them, and when he spoke his voice had a faraway fuzzy edge.

He slumped further back against the bar. "This is the way it's been. Ever since that first one at Four Fords River. That time it was Cary or me—and I drew faster."

He paused for breath and went on. "Ever since then it's been like this. Some crazy kid tries to cut me down. You never can talk them out of it. Figure if they get me, they get my reputation. If I don't shoot first, I'm dead. And if I do shoot first, I'm just Kruvane, the gunhand, the killer—drawing on another harmless kid just to see him

drop." He wiped a hand across his forehead. "They chase me around like I was a loco wolf. And the only thing I want is to be let alone."

They listened in silence, and they were still silent when he shoved away from the bar and lurched unsteadily in the direction of the doors.

Just before reaching them, he turned and his eyes sought out Jits Corby. The ghost of a smile slid across his face. "Thanks, friend," he said softly. Then he pushed through the doors.

Charlie Hesson, with a look of pained bewilderment on his white face, was just sitting up and beginning to be sick, when they heard a thump outside followed by the snort of a frightened horse.

After a moment's hesitation, they hurried through the doors and across the boardwalk toward the tie racks.

By the dim light of the saloon lamps they saw Kruvane sprawled face down a few yards farther out, in the middle of the dusty road. His horse stood a short distance away, ears pricked up in fright, and with the reins dangling.

Apparently Kruvane had slipped while trying to mount or had fallen after gaining the saddle.

"Drunk as a tick," somebody muttered.

Someone came up with a lantern and they turned him over.

Healy Cott, one of the town's self-styled medicos, peered down at him in the flickering light. He frowned. "He ain't just drunk."

Bending down, he unbuttoned Kruvane's corduroy coat. A gasp of astonishment came from the crowd when he opened it. Kruvane's shirt front was bloody. A crude bandage, soaked with blood, was loosely swathed around his right shoulder.

Cott felt for a heart beat, shook his head, and stood up. "He's gone. Likely been bleedin' for hours. He was a dead man when he rode in here."

Jits Corby limped slowly forward, stared down for a long moment, and finally took off his hat.

He looked around at them. "I could see something pretty bad was riding him. All he wanted was a few last drinks, in the light—with friends."

Jits Corby swore bitterly. "That crazy kid!"

By **HASCAL
GILES**

"I'm gonna stick ye a
little bit to persuade ye."



TRAIL OF NO RETURN

*The world of Charlie Running
Horse was dead, and Charlie sought
only to join it—in the decreed
tradition of his warriors' tribe.*

HE WAS in the third day of his Fast of No Return when the hunter found him, and this tormented his sensitive Indian soul as much as the other things which at last had forced him to come here in the Dakota badlands to starve himself to death.

Though the man moved across the hot

and vacant earth with the same economy of sound and movement that the Indian would have exercised, Charlie Running Horse heard him coming when he was yet a hundred feet away. And despite the fact the Indian was hunkered down behind an up-ended slab of granite as a partial escape from the scorching sun, the invader knew he was there before he rounded a pile of ugly black boulders and faced him. The badlands-wise saw such things, saw shadows that did not match the objects casting them, and were forewarned.

There was no suddenness in the movements of this man who had walked up out of the baked yellow plains and into the sun-seared rock and sand beyond the Little Muddy. Before he looked directly at the gaunt and remorseful Indian he led his two animals—a rangy brown horse and a smaller pinto pack horse—well into the slant-walled arroyo Charlie Running Horse had chosen as a place to sit out his time. Afterward, he dusted mechanically at his fringed buckskins, eased his ragged-brimmed black hat back on his bushy gray hair and spoke to Charlie Running Horse in swift guttural Sioux.

Charlie Running Horse raised his eyes to the man's face, staring stolidly at him and refusing to reply. In Deadwood and Sturgis and Miles City and the other railroad camp towns he had seen this wiry, mahogany-skinned man, and the Sioux did not forget such people as Raleigh Rusk.

Rusk had seen him, too, and in other days he had called him by his name. For this occasion, Charlie Running Horse had dressed in his best white man's clothes—the red silk shirt, high-peaked gray hat and blue drill pants—and Raleigh Rusk should know he was not a reservation brave. Had the long hunts and summer suns and driving winter snows dimmed those slitted gray eyes at last, or was this more of the bad things that were happening to Charlie Running Horse?

Raleigh Rusk walked closer and squatted unceremoniously on his heels in front of the Indian, peered sharply at him, and then his eyes flickered; for he knew much of the deep things in the minds of the Sioux.

He spoke again, this time in the unhurried twang of the buffalo hunters. "You're of the Hunkpapa tribe, eh lad?"

Charlie Running Horse nodded, but his face showed no change, for he was already

losing interest in the meeting. At first he had been intent on forcing concessions from this man whom the Sioux knew and respected because he was among the last of the great white hunters.

But why should he pamper himself with a last morsel of pride when Rusk was of the same ill-fated era as he, a part of that which was useless because it was passing? Rusk, whose big buffalo gun still lay there silent across the aparejos of the pinto, was walking the steps of the sand ghosts because the buffalo were gone. Since the last hunt of 1883 only the bones of the vanquished monarchs marked the trails of the great slaughter, bones that had bleached white for two years under a sun that had seen the great herds disappear like the down of cottonwoods on the chinooks' breath.

"Ye et anything today?" Rusk cast a timing glance at the glaring sun, moving south and westward over the black hills now, and then nodded toward his bulging aparejos. "Looks like you're campin' light here. I laid me in a good grub pile as I come through Deadwood, and I'd be obleeged to share with ye."

Charlie Running Horse's tongue was thick and rough inside his wide mouth, and he did not speak at once. Too, his head had the buzz of many insects inside it, and he did not want to be humiliated by faintness in his voice.

At last he said: "You will forgive me and know I am grateful, but I cannot accept your kindness. Do not ask me of the things which the old men say tell to no one, but do not make your food here. It will torture me. Please ride your trail and leave me mine, and we will both be alone with our own kind of peace."

Grunting with the effort, Rusk arose and rubbed his palm across his stubble-grown chin.

Then he moved over and gathered up the trailing reins of the rangy brown.

"Ye Injuns must be born thataway," he sighed. "Even when ye was yanked away from the lodges as a young'un and sent to school by some hopeful cuss, ye jest hang natcherl by them ignorant notions. But yours is yours and mine's mine. I was jest palaverin' fer company, but now I got to be movin' along. It's eight-ten mile to a water hole, and I aim to make camp by moon-up. Good trailin', lad."

He moved off without noise, disappearing quickly behind a grotesque turret of bluish earth. In complete silence once again, Charlie Running Horse found solitude in the emptiness about him for this was the secret of the Fast of No Return. After Rusk had gone, he was able to lapse once more into the semi-coma he had enjoyed before. As he sat in such stupor he could hear in his mind the droning voices and smell the tallow smoke of the lodges he had known as a boy.

The fast was proving as simple as his ancient father, vanished now with the buffalo and the war parties and mescal orgies, had said, and it was truly as proper as his people had held it to be.

"Only the great and noble Sioux have the courage to deliver themselves to the Great Spirit when they have failed and are in disgrace," his father had said. "May you, my son, remember this and be honorable in the eyes of your forefathers."

Charlie Running Horse had not been allowed to learn much of the counsel of his father, for he had been taken as a hostage by General Hancock's expedition in '67 when the boy was in his tenth year, but this one memory had been stored in his mind, and now it was serving him when failure was so plainly written in the path of his life.

Had the situation been worth placing the blame for, Charlie Running Horse easily could have blamed the white men. It was they who had confused him. From the cavalry post he had been passed on to an officer's wife who had thought the Christian thing to do was to place him in a mission school. Here he had stayed until he was fifteen, mastering the white man's language better than many who had been born with it on their tongue, adopting his dress and following his ambitions.

Afterward, he had run away to become an interpreter with the Seventh Cavalry. This had been an adventure at first, until he became a center of suspicion any time a scouting foray met an unexpected attack. He had roamed farther afield then, serving as a wrangler with trail herds in Montana, as a freight hustler, and finally as a laborer on the new railroads. He was happy in all these latter jobs, but he was not allowed to keep them long.

The end always came in the same manner—when a white man asked for his position.

Answers to his protests were always the same, too: "Injun help is all right when you can't do better, but we got a man now, chief. You can't turn down a white man and keep an Injun. Don't seem right."

Charlie Running Horse had finally sought refuge with his own people. But they were on reservations now, looking to the white man as a suckling calf looks to a condescending cow, and this had rotted them as the fungus rots the cactus. They were drunken and quarrelsome and lazy, and the thought of becoming like them sickened Charlie Running Horse. And because he cautioned them against the desertion of their crops and hunting, they spat at him and scorned him with accusations of haughtiness.

So now he was not an Indian and he was not a white man. A man of no use to others was of no use to himself, and a burden to all. It was this that had brought Charlie Running Horse into the badlands to starve himself to death. And the Fast of No Return was proving more soul-cleansing satisfaction than torture. But it grew lonely in the badlands as the shadows of evening grew long and melancholy, and this was his only regret.

AS IF the great spirits had sympathized with him at that moment, Raleigh Rusk stepped into view again farther down the arroyo, and came toward him with his easy, gliding gait. He had left his pack animals out of sight this time, and his approach had been as silent as the wind.

Rusk wiped sweat from his leathery brow and grinned amiably. He sat down on the ground, lolling back on an elbow and resting immediately and thoroughly.

"Halloo again now," Rusk said, his voice hearty. "I ain't one to fergit a face, even a Injun face, and I kept thinkin' on ye as I went along. It come to me after a bit. You're Charlie Runnin' Horse. Last time I seed ye was when ye was a handyman at Orchel's store in Miles City. Likewise I figgered out what ye was up to out here, 'cause I've heard the Sioux tell about it m'self. I come back to tell ye it's a damn' piece of foolishness fer a eddicated Injun."

Charlie Running Horse fought down the weakness that possessed him after three days without food and only the cactus juices for water, and managed to show friendliness in his craggy face. For now that Rusk knew his secret he could share it with him, and it

would not be quite so lonely any more.

"You are welcome this time, Raleigh Rusk," he said in the methodic English he had learned at the mission school. "And now you must join me in the Fast of No Return, for there is nothing left for you in the Dakotas as there is nothing left for me. It will be my last honor to make my journey with the mighty white hunter."

Rusk did not laugh, and for a moment his lined face was in repose, looking older and sadder. It seemed he might be dreaming dreams of the beyond.

Noticing this, Charlie Running Horse talked again, telling the hunter what the old men in the lodges had told him. The Fast of No Return was not a hard thing for those with the iron will of the Sioux or for the hard-bellied men like Raleigh Rusk.

The first three days were the difficult ones, for it was then that the hunger pangs gnawed at your insides. From that time on the journey grew easier. The secret was to get far from food and water, as Charlie Running Horse had done, and to steal out once during the night to take a little moisture from the cactus plants to build your courage for the burning daylight.

After the fourth day, weakness commanded you and made the cactus water seem unworthy of the effort. Then a seeping drowsiness dulled the hunger pangs while the stomach muscles shrank within themselves and no longer begged for food. Afterward, there was unconsciousness and the fast ran out its time without further guidance.

"It will be like a rendezvous of the old days, my friend," Charlie Running Horse concluded zealously, "and we will talk of those days and relive the good things until the red sun drops to rise no more to haunt us with what it has seen."

For a moment Rusk was silent, and then he straightened with resolve. "I could do it, all right. And maybe I would, too, 'ceptin' I got some things to do first."

Charlie Running Horse shook his head sadly. "But you are a hunter, and there are no buffalo."

The old hunter chuckled quietly. "Shore thar's buffalo, lad. Where in hell did they go, now? When the hunt stopped in '83, the prairie was black with 'em, and the arth didn't jest open up and swaller 'em. They jest lit out fer some place I ain't been yet,

and thar's where I'll find 'em. That's my callin, lad, huntin' buffalo."

"And now," said the Sioux, "your calling has no answer, just as mine, and you must join me in the fast."

Rusk kicked impatiently at a rock under his foot. "Nothin' doin', Charlie. And I ain't ridin' on 'and leavin' ye here fer the buzzard's, neither. I'm takin' ye back to the settlement where I've got a pard that'll stake ye fer a while. Come on."

Charlie Running Horse did not move. He looked with disappointment at the hunter, and slowly his head nodded refusal. At this there was a flashing dart of Rusk's hand toward his boot, and when he spoke again he was pointing a gleaming knife at the Indian.

"I jest natcherly hate contrariness, Charlie. If'n ye don't git up off'n your haunches and come with me, I'm goin' to stick ye a little bit to persuade ye. Leavin' ye out here would jest prey on my mind and be a bother to my huntin', or I wouldn't give a damn if ever Sioux in the nation starved hisself to death. It jest happens I know ye, that's all."

THERE was no disturbance in Charlie Running Horse's face, for a man on the threshold of death cannot be placed in further jeopardy. As a fatalistic expression settled over the Indian's bronze countenance Rusk realized this, too, and he swore under his breath, shoving the dirk back into his boot.

"I godfrey, I'll jest have to drag ye in by the scruff of the neck," Rusk grunted. He lunged at the Indian, but Charlie Running Horse had anticipated this move. The Indian dodged aside, rising groggily to his feet. As Rusk fell off balance, Charlie Running Horse clambered over a pile of rocks and made a dash toward the barren prairie.

At another time he might have made an escape, but now he was weak and unsteady on his feet. Rusk caught him in less than twenty yards, laying an iron-fisted hand on his shoulder. The hunter whirled him around, and the Indian careened drunkenly and fell. Rusk was on top of him immediately, sitting astride his chest and pinioning Charlie Running Horse's arms to the ground with his knees. Without hesitating, Rusk drove a stinging blow into the Indian's face, grinning pleasantly.

"There now," the hunter breathed. "I

been wantin' to do that since I first figgered out what was eatin' ye. You're like them town men down in Deadwood, and I shore hate to see it takin' hold in a Injun. Most of them dudes down there ain't got a want in the world 'cept to git their paws on a good thing without gittin' up a sweat.

"Last week I got likkered up down there with a young bucko, and all he done was whimper about his back luck. I wanted to bash his face in, jest like I done yours. This here Dakota country is my domain, as the Lord says, and I ain't havin' it insulted by a bunch of young whelps cussin' it 'cause it won't provide fer 'em. Thar's gold in the hills fer them that's got guts to dig fer it, the prairies are hidin' a thousand wild broncs left by the Injuns to run free when they was put on the reservation—and somewheres thar's buffalo."

The blood of excitement warmed Rusk's face and put a sparkle in his eyes. The fire of his voice and the jolt of his fist had shaken Charlie Running Horse completely out of his self-induced stupor.

"Is there any way to be sure there are buffalo, my friend?"

Raleigh Rusk smiled, looking out into the distance. "I'm shore of it right here!" He thumped the chest of his greasy buckskins with his fist.

He turned his gaze back to the man imprisoned beneath him, and his voice was tight between his lips. "Now ye listen to me, Charlie. Unless ye decide to listen to reason, I'm aimin' to sit here and beat on ye until ye don't know you're in this world. Then I'm aimin' to throw ye across my pack and take ye back like I said. Ye ready to palaver again?"

Charlie Running Horse blinked his eyes thoughtfully, feeling the lump growing on his

cheek where Rusk's fist had landed. The urge to live had suddenly returned to him, not because of the hunter's threats, but because of the things he had said. Only a coward would want to die with Rusk's disdainful challenge ringing in his ears.

After a moment the Indian's eyes met the hunter's glance, surrendering to Rusk's terms. The hunter stood up, trusting Charlie Running Horse again, and walked back into the arroyo.

Beyond a turn in the dry wash Charlie Running Horse heard the rattle of aparejos being opened, and Rusk reappeared presently with a slab of a jerky in his hands.

"Look, lad," the hunter said, "why don't ye jine me in this last hunt? I'm headin' fer the nor'west territories. That's whar the buffalo must be, and I got me a hunch thar's where I'll find me a waller."

He laid the piece of dried beef on a rock in front of Charlie Running Horse and said, "Eat that and git your head cleared up. I'll wait fer ye a week at Fort Assiniboin, and then I'm headin' on. All ye need is a want, lad, and there ain't no better want than huntin' buffalo. Will ye jine me?"

"Perhaps," the Indian said quietly.

Nodding, Raleigh Rusk laid his hand on the other's shoulder a moment and then walked toward his horses. In a moment he was gone, and the place was again quiet.

Charlie Running Horse looked at the meat a long time before he finally rose and went about the task of gathering enough twigs and buffalo chips to make a fire. He did not hurry for he wanted to think long on the words of Raleigh Rusk, who was a better teacher than all those Charlie Running Horse had met in the white man's schools. They had taught him to look to

(Please continue on page 110)

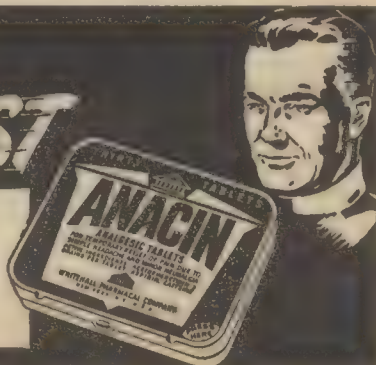
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NO MAN'S HAND

By CLIFTON
ADAMS



She was thinking that Matt Swanson was a gambler, and always would be.

There was more at stake than money, and more in the hole than a card, so young Matt Swanson anteed up with his future.



Word got around fast that Matt Swanson was back and a big game was already under way.

MATT SWANSON rode into Ringo three years older—and quite a bit wiser, he hoped—than the day he rode out of the place. He walked his horse slowly through the main street of the small Texas cattle town, noticing with satisfaction that nothing had changed while he was away. He was aware of familiar faces watching him, regarding his single-rigged saddle, and canvas windbreaker, and flat-crowned hat, all of which surely identified him as a Northerner. None of them seemed to recognize him as young Matt Swanson who had lived right here in Ringo all his life—up until three years ago.

But that was no wonder, Matt thought. He was covered with trail dust, and he hadn't bothered to shave since he started his long ride down from Dakota. He smiled faintly to himself. He wondered what they would say if they knew this rag-tag looking stranger was carrying four thousand dollars worth of gold dust in his battered saddle bags.

He pulled his horse up at a watering trough and let the animal drink. He squinted up at the sun which was beginning to slant over to the west. About one o'clock, he thought. And the Ferguson House saloon, across the street, was already getting a good play. He pulled his horse's nose out of the water and headed for the livery barn at the end of the street.

Later, after washing his face at the livery pump and seeing that his horse was taken care of, he went back up the plankwalk toward the Ferguson House, the two saddle bags slung over his shoulder. He had reached the middle of the block when a buckboard pulled up beside him, and a man said, "Matt? Matt Swanson?"

Matt stopped and turned around. The man was already out of the hack, reaching for his hand.

"I'll be damned!" the man said heartily. "We was afraid you had left for good, Matt."

Matt grinned. "You know what they say about the bad penny, Mr. Sewell."

They stood looking at each other, the older man grinning fondly. They had known each other for a long time—the Sewell ranch had been right next to the Swanson outfit for as long as Matt could remember. Or rather—he corrected himself—what *used to be* the Swanson outfit. It was the Ferguson ranch now, and had been for three years.

Almost automatically, Matt asked, "Joan, is she all right, Mr. Sewell?"

The older man's face sobered. He was a large, gray-haired, gray-eyed man in his early sixties. "Yes," he said. "She's fine, Matt. Just fine."

Matt felt a discomfort settle over them. He and Joan Sewell had had fine plans once, three years ago. They were going to be married, they were going to have a fine house and a family, and finally they were going to join the Sewell and Swanson spreads together and make it one of the biggest ranches in this part of Texas. But all that was before Matt's craving for gambling had lost it all. In one single night of poker he had lost the ranch, the livestock, everything, to Morry Ferguson. And the next day he had left Ringo.

Now, he tried to think of something to say. He wished that there was a way that he could explain what he had done, but he knew it was no use. He hadn't even

written a letter in those three years. He hadn't so much as let her know where he had gone. He hadn't wanted to tie Joan down with promises that he probably wouldn't be able to fulfill. If she met another man that she wanted to marry—well, Matt told himself, that would be the best thing.

Suddenly, Sewell's face brightened again. "What the hell are we standing here for? Come on down to the bar and I'll set you up to something to cut the alkali out of your throat."

Matt forced a grin. "Thanks. I think I could use it."

MATT was acutely conscious of the staccato rattle of a roulette ball as they went into the Ferguson House. And he noticed that two of the three poker tables in the back of the place were occupied. He caught himself looking for Ferguson at one of the tables, but the gambler hadn't set in yet. Most of the daytime games were for low stakes, and Ferguson didn't waste his time on that kind of poker.

They went up to the bar, and Matt caught Sewell looking at him with quiet curiosity. He felt his face warm, knowing what was in the rancher's mind. He was thinking that gambling was still in Matt Swanson's blood, that three years hadn't changed him.

The bartender slid a bottle of rye and two glasses down the bar. Sewell stopped them and poured.

"Here's to you, Matt," he said, lifting his glass. "I hope you stay with us here in Ringo."

Matt hoped so, too. But that depended on a lot of things. He lifted his glass. "To you, Mr. Sewell."

They had their next drink at a table on the other side of the room. Matt fished around in his mind for something to say. He wanted to hear more about Joan, but somehow he couldn't bring himself to ask about her now.

"Things have changed some," Mr. Sewell put in, "since you went away, Matt."

Matt looked up. "I was just thinking that the town was about the same."

"Oh, not the town. It's the ranch, mostly. Remember the water hole that used to border our properties? Since Ferguson took over the ranch he claimed it was on his land . . ." The old rancher looked into his empty glass. "Well, it turned out that

it was. He had a survey made to prove it, then he fenced it off for his own cattle only."

Matt stiffened. "What are you doing for water?"

Sewell smiled without humor. "Doing without," he said. "I can't fight him when he's got the law on his side. If he wants to hog all the water, I guess there's nothing I can do about it."

For a moment Matt said nothing. *When I lost the ranch, he thought bitterly, I might have known that Ferguson would try something like this.* Matt had known all along that there had been no water on Sewell's land, but that hadn't made any difference as long as he had owned the neighboring ranch. But not Ferguson. Fencing off the water was a sure way of forcing Sewell to give up his spread and sell to Ferguson for whatever the gambler felt like offering.

But the thought that kept hammering in Matt's head was, *I didn't only lose my own ranch in that poker game, but Sewell's as well.*

The rancher looked at Matt and saw what he was thinking. "I'm sorry, Matt," he said. "I didn't mean to bring it up. Let's talk about something more pleasant."

The old man went on talking, and Matt listened without hearing. For three years he had been getting ready for this day. Fourteen hours a day he had panned gold, standing knee deep in an icy stream until his feet and legs were blue with cold, just to get another chance at his ranch. He had learned his lesson about gambling, there on that Sioux reservation in Dakota. When you had to work three years to make up what you had lost in a few hours, a lot of the fascination went out of it. All he wanted was to get enough money to buy the ranch back and let the professionals, like Ferguson, take care of the gambling.

Four thousand dollars, he had figured, would be plenty. Ferguson was first of all a gambler, and not a rancher, and Matt could see no reason why he wouldn't take a reasonable price for the spread that he had acquired so easily. But now the bottom had dropped out of his plan. Ferguson had discovered that he had legal control of all the water, which made the property much more valuable than he had guessed. In effect, he owned two ranches instead

of one, as soon as he forced Sewell out. With all that in his grasp, the gambler would laugh at an offer of four thousand dollars.

Bitterly, Matt thought of the three long years work that he had done for nothing. Then a shadow of an idea crossed his mind, and it chilled him as surely as those icy waters of Dakota gold streams had chilled him for three years. It was all for nothing . . . unless he wanted to gamble again.

But after the first shock had passed—that possibility of losing everything all over again—he realized that there wasn't any other answer. There was a bare chance that Ferguson might take a chance on the ranch in a poker game, because he was that kind of a gambler.

Matt rose suddenly from the table. "It's a little early for supper," he said, "but I promised myself a quick change from trail grub when I hit town. Is Ma Jackson's eating place still open?"

"Sure," Mr. Sewell said. "I'll go over with you and have some coffee."

They went over to the bar and Sewell planked silver on the stained wood to pay for the drinks.

"Let me get it," Matt said, opening his saddle bags and taking out the little canvas sacks of dust. "I'll have to get some of this weighed out to pay for the grub."

The rancher's eyes widened, and Matt grinned.

"I didn't hold up a pay load," he said. "This came from Deadwood, up in the Dakota country. There's more up there, just like it, but my hands just don't seem to fit a gold pan."

Sewell shook his head in wonderment. "From the way you looked I figured you didn't have the price of a shave. There must be two, three thousand dollars there."

"Four thousand," Matt said. He shoved the bags across the bar as the bartender came up. "Will you put this in the safe and let me have five dollars until it's weighed out?"

The bartender looked at him curiously. He picked up a sack and weighed it carefully in his hand. "Sure," he said finally. "I'll get the boss to write you out a receipt."

Later, after steak and potatoes and slab of Ma Jackson's dried apple pie, Matt felt better. After the coffee mugs had been re-

filled, Sewell said, "Don't you think that was a lot of dust to trust to a saloon keeper?"

"Ferguson's honest enough in his own way," Matt said. "I never knew him to steal anything outright when he had a chance to take it with a deck of cards."

The rancher's face tightened. "You mean that's what you panned gold three years for? Just to get into a poker game?"

"That wasn't my original intention," Matt said soberly, hoping that Sewell would understand. "But do you think I could *buy* my ranch back for four thousand dollars?"

For a long moment the old man said nothing. Then, "No, Matt, I guess you couldn't." And Matt knew that he understood.

IT WAS the middle of the afternoon when they got back to the Ferguson House, and Matt saw immediately that the gambler was ready for him. Ferguson was standing at the end of the bar when they came in, smiling slightly. He walked up the bar, hand outstretched.

"Hell, Matt, we're glad to see you back in Ringo."

Matt thought, *I'll bet you're glad to see me back. You never had such easy pickings as Matt Swanson used to be.* But he held out and shook with the gambler.

"It's kind of good to be back," Matt said.

The gambler went on smiling, and Matt knew that he had already inspected those sacks of dust and was planning a more or less legal way to get them away from him. Ferguson waved three fingers at the bartender.

"The drinks are on me," he said easily. "Matt, it looks like your luck has changed. I had a look at that dust of yours. I hope you don't mind."

Matt shrugged. "I wouldn't have left it here in the first place, if I hadn't trusted you."

The gambler laughed. He recognized the game that Matt was playing. It happened often in the gambling business—the poor sucker losing everything he owned, then working to build up another stake in the futile hopes of getting back his original losses. Nothing could have pleased Ferguson better. It wasn't often that a sucker like Matt Swanson walked in just begging to throw away four thousand dollars.

The gambler nodded toward the back of the saloon. "There's a table open," he said mildly. "Would you be interested in a little game, Matt?"

Three long years . . . Matt Swanson felt his insides curl up. But he managed to say carelessly, "What do you suggest?"

The gambler shrugged. "Buck heads?"

Matt didn't like that. He wanted at least two more players in the game. Not that Ferguson wasn't an honest gambler, but those well trained hands of his might be tempted to do things with the cards if the deal came around to him too often. Matt glanced at Sewell and noticed that the rancher's eyes were uneasy.

"If there's enough in it," Ferguson went on evenly, "we could get Charley Crouse and Ben Masterson to sit in for a while."

Crouse and Masterson weren't professionals like Ferguson, but they didn't bow to any man when the stakes were high enough. One a banker by profession, and the other a cattle broker, Matt knew that more than once they had backed professionals down with their heavy raises. He thought it over carefully and decided that Crouse and Masterson were the men he wanted. With them in the game, Ferguson would have to watch them as well as Matt.

Matt took a deep breath. "The game's worth four thousand on my end."

Ferguson poured the drinks, smiling. "That ought to be enough to make it interesting."

WORD got around fast in Ringo that Matt Swanson was back in town and a big game was already under way at the Ferguson House. By sundown the big felt-covered table in the back of the saloon was surrounded by spectators, and the crowd was growing all the time. As Matt studied his cards, he thought, *More than likely Joan knows about it by now.* More than likely she was thinking the way the others were, that Matt Swanson was a gambler, and always would be. There were men like that—when the gambling fever got hold of them, nothing was important except seeing what the next card would be.

Charley Crouse said, "I bet ten." He put in a blue chip and dragged a red one and a white one. They had set the price on chips at twenty-five for the blue, ten for red, and five for white. The ante was five

dollars. The betting was limited only by amount in the middle of the table—for instance, in the first round it was possible to bet twenty dollars, the next eighty, the next three hundred and twenty, barring raises. It was a game for very rich men like Crouse or Masterson, or for professionals like Ferguson, who could wait and bide his time, judging the percentages carefully before he plunged in. It wasn't a game for amateurs like Matt Swanson.

Ferguson shoved in a blue chip and dragged a white one. "Up ten," he said. He had a king and a ten showing. Crouse had ace, deuce. Crouse had been getting most of the cards, so far in the game. If his luck was still holding out, he was good for a pair of deuces anyway, possibly aces. Ferguson had been betting cautiously, so his raise probably meant that he had a pair of something. Tens more than likely, because Matt had one of his kings in the hole.

"It'll cost you twenty to see another card, Ben," Charley Crouse said pleasantly.

Masterson had two small cards showing on the table. He grunted disgustedly and turned them over. "It's up to you, Matt."

Matt looked carefully at his hole card. It was still a king. It hadn't changed. With only a six of clubs and an eight of diamonds showing, that king wasn't much help, especially with Ferguson having one showing and maybe another one in the hole.

He turned his cards over and said, "I have to quit."

Charley Crouse called the raise, and he and Ferguson got cards. Matt sat back, studying the other men in the game. Crouse was a big, red-faced man, good-natured, but a wild better at times. He liked to play hunches, and on an amazing percentage of hands he made his hunches pay. He also liked to bluff, especially when he was butting heads with Masterson. He would rather bluff Masterson out of a twenty-dollar pot than to win five hundred on an honest hand.

Ferguson, of course, played the professional's game, incredibly patient and wise in the way of cards and men. He was a tall, slack-faced man, wearing the familiar gambler's white ruffled shirt, with his sleeves held up with black satin sleeve garters. At the start of the game he had taken off his black broadcloth coat and

folded it neatly across the back of a chair. He looked as fresh as when they began.

Masterson, the banker, played a plodding game for the most part, a solemn, sober-eyed man who almost never saw the humor of a situation. The satisfaction that he got out of playing poker, Matt thought, was that he usually came out ahead of Charley Crouse. Not that he tried to maneuver the game just so he could butt heads with Crouse. Poker to him was the same as banking; a business in which he expected a reasonable return for his investment.

Ferguson got another king for his next card—possibly the case king, Matt thought—which made a pair showing. Crouse dealt himself the four of hearts.

"No help for me," the cattleman said sadly. "The pair of kings bets."

Ferguson sized up the situation quickly. "Kings bets a hundred."

He shoved out four blue chips and Crouse laughed. The cattleman called and raised two hundred.

Ferguson's face showed nothing, but Matt could almost see the way his mind was working. Probably, Crouse was bluffing, but on the other hand it was quite possible that he had aces wired. No other aces were showing on the table. Without batting an eye, the gambler pushed out two hundred, and then five hundred.

The case king, Matt thought. Ferguson must have it. He *had* to have it to beat Crouse's possible aces. The cattleman hesitated. Five hundred dollars it would cost him to see the next card, and five hundred dollars was respectable money, even to Crouse. Ferguson's face showed absolutely nothing, waiting for Crouse to decide.

Suddenly the cattleman muttered, "By Heaven, you'd *better* have it!" and shoved his stack to the middle of the table. He dragged a stack of blue chips to one side and said, "I'm light a hundred and fifty. Cards coming."

He hit Ferguson with a jack. "No help," he said. He turned the next card over for himself. It was another ace, giving him a pair showing.

Matt thought he saw Ferguson's face pale. In one abrupt movement, the gambler picked up his last card, scooped the others up and turned them over. "Aces are good," he said flatly. "It's your pot, Crouse."

Crouse laughed loudly and happily raked the chips to his chest. "Yes sir, tonight's my night," he said between chuckles. "Ben, you're next if you don't watch out. And you too, Matt. I'm not showin' any favorites tonight. When this game's over I'll give all my cows to the starvin' Chinese and retire on my winnings."

Ferguson put on his expressionless mask again as he motioned to the bartender banking the game. "Take another thousand out of the safe," he said, "and buy me some more chips."

BY MIDNIGHT Crouse's string of luck had about frayed out, but not before he had nicked Ferguson for two more large pots, and Masterson for one. Masterson's plodding game was beginning to show dividends, now that the first wild flurry was over and the players settled down to more conservative poker, bluffing only occasionally to "keep each other honest."

Matt counted his chips as Masterson scooped the cards up to shuffle. He was about even, maybe forty or fifty dollars one way or the other. Even, after nine hours of steady playing. That kind of poker wasn't going to get his ranch back for him.

And it wouldn't save Sewell's place, or give him a chance to show Joan that he had changed and was ready to settle down. If he was to do any good, it had to be in this game. All or nothing. He knew all too well what happened to men who tried to cut Ferguson down a little at a time.

But, for the first time in his life, Matt was afraid of his money. That gold dust hadn't been handed to him free of charge, the way the ranch had been. When his father died the ranch had fallen to Matt,

and he hadn't realized what an incredible amount of hard work and sweat went into building up four thousand dollars worth of ranch buildings and foundation herd.

But he knew now. It took him three years to learn, and every time he put out money to see a card he thought, *That's three months work, or four months, or five.* And more often than not, he would drag the money back and turn his cards over, even when the odds on winning were on his side.

Matt Swanson, the gambler who couldn't be cured. That was a laugh.

Matt looked up as Masterson began to deal. The reflector oil lamp hanging from a rafter poured a circle of sickly orange light on the table. Dozens of men, maybe forty or fifty, stood or sat or lounged in the semi-darkness beyond the ring of light, watching the game. It was a game to remember, all right, Matt thought. A game to tell their grandchildren about.

For a moment Matt caught sight of Mr. Sewell's face there among all the others. The rancher's face was tense and his eyes worried, as Matt felt his own must be. At that moment Matt would gladly have gone back to Dakota and panned gold for another three years if that would have solved anything. But he knew it wouldn't. By that time Ferguson would have forced Joan and her father out of Texas, and the two ranches and all the water would belong to the gambler.

"The queen bets," Masterson said. "Matt, you're five light in the center."

Matt shoved out a white chip for the ante. Ferguson had the queen showing on top of his hole card, Masterson the four of hearts, Crouse the ten of diamonds. Matt

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had the jack of spades up, and when he lifted the corner of the hole card he saw that it was the jack of hearts.

Jacks wired. Back to back. He sat woodenly, trying not to listen to the pounding in his chest, hoping that the others wouldn't hear it. Ferguson flipped in a red chip, then found a stray white one and flipped it in, too.

"Queen bets fifteen."

Soberly, Masterson pushed in a blue chip and dragged a red one. Matt called the fifteen. After playing close to his vest all night, an early raise would probably chase the others out of the pot. Crouse called and Masterson said, "Cards coming."

Matt caught a seven of clubs. "No help," Masterson said.

Crouse got the king of hearts, Ferguson the jack of diamonds, and Masterson turned up another four, the four of spades, for himself.

"I guess my pair bets," Masterson said, looking around the table. He lifted four blue chips off his stack and put them in the middle, dragging two red ones. "The little pair bets eighty. We'll see where the power is."

It was up to Matt. He doubted that Masterson had a third four in the hole. He called, and so did Crouse, glaring across the table at Masterson. Ferguson studied the pot which now had three hundred and twenty dollars in it. Then, stonefaced, he shoved out a stack of blues.

"I call and raise three hundred." He smiled pleasantly at Masterson.

The pounding in Matt's chest skipped a beat. Did Ferguson have the third jack in the hole? If he did, the gambler's queen high would beat Matt's seven of clubs for the pot. Or, if it was a queen in the hole, Matt still couldn't win.

Masterson didn't have his third four. He folded disgustedly and sat back.

Or maybe Ferguson has a good hole card, Matt thought. An ace, maybe, and he's trying to bluff through on that. The gambler hadn't run a bluff for some time. He was about due for one. Matt counted the chips on the table. So far he had a hundred dollars in the pot. If he didn't call, he would have to throw in and lose that hundred—but that was better than losing four hundred.

Matt straightened in his chair, working his shoulders back and forth to ease the stiffness and ache that came from sitting so long in one position. He realized that he was tired and his eyes were heavy with weariness. If he had been smart he wouldn't have got into a game like this until he had had a chance to bathe and clean up and rest. That was one of Ferguson's favorite tactics, to wait until his man was groggy from fatigue and then begin gambling with a recklessness calculated to throw his opponent off balance.

But it was too late for regrets. It was now or never, Matt thought. He shoved twelve blue chips to the center of the table.

Surprisingly, Charley Crouse called the raise. He had hesitated on Masterson's eighty-dollar bet, and now he was calling three hundred, cheerfully, as if he was happy to get his money in.

"This is the way to play poker," he said grinning widely. "Nickel and dime stuff is for pikers. I call three hundred."

MATT breathed deeply. His mouth felt dry, and his stomach sagged like forty pounds of buckshot in his belly. Thirteen hundred dollars in the middle of the table. He didn't have the heart to look up and pick out Sewell's tense face from the others. This was going to be the hand that he could hang his life on—his, and Sewell's and Joan's. Ferguson was in too deep to back out now. A good gambler never gives up a bluff or a good hand, and Ferguson was nothing if not a good gambler. Cards came around.

Matt's heart hit bottom as he saw the six of hearts that he had paid three hundred and eighty dollars to get a look at.

"No help," Masterson said dryly.

Crouse got five of diamonds, which couldn't do him any good. A pair of kings was the best he could have—but a pair of kings would be enough to beat Matt. And Ferguson too, for that matter. Ferguson got an eight of spades, and Matt breathed a little easier.

"No help anywhere," Masterson said. "Queen, jack still high. Your bet, Ferguson."

Ferguson counted his stack. He had exactly six hundred dollars. He shoved it into the middle.

Matt held his breath, shoving in what

he had, five hundred. "A hundred light on the side," he said, dragging the blue chips over.

Crouse cursed. "A lousy five! Of all the things to get, and Ben gives me a lousy damned five!" He glared across the table at Masterson, the dealer. Then he turned his cards over. "I'm out."

"Cards," Masterson said disinterestedly. And Matt and Ferguson nodded.

"A six of diamonds for Matt," Masterson said flatly, "A pair of sixes showing."

An excited murmur went up around the table, beyond the circle of lamplight.

"Jack of clubs for Ferguson," Masterson said, turning the last card up. "A pair of Jacks."

Matt sat stiffly, studying the cards. Ferguson had a pair of jacks showing, and an eight and a queen.

Matt's own hand read: Jack, seven, and a pair of sixes.

Ferguson said, "I guess it's still my bet, Matt."

Matt looked at his own depleted stack, and then at Ferguson's. The gambler started pulling blue chips over to the side of the table. "I'll have to be light," he said easily. "I'll bet a thousand."

The room was dead quiet now. Matt could almost feel the anguished look that Mr. Sewell was giving him. A thousand dollars! If Matt called, that would leave him only two thousand in dust up in Ferguson's safe.

Well, this was what he had asked for. He said abruptly, "I call—and raise for the amount of dust I have left. I guess you know what that is."

The faces around the table crowded in closer, excitedly. Ferguson looked up, studying his face carefully. He drummed the table thoughtfully, looking occasionally at the cards.

"All right, Matt," he said finally. "You've got yourself a bet. What have you got?"

This was the time that Matt had been waiting for. Crouse had sent Ferguson to the safe three times in the earlier part of the game, and Matt was counting on the gambler being out of cash.

"Are we betting wind or money?" Matt asked.

The gambler glanced at him and Matt knew that he had guessed right.

"Three thousand dollars is a lot of cash, Matt. You know I don't keep that kind of money here in the saloon. But I'd be glad to write you—"

"I want to see the money on the table," Matt said tightly. "That's the way you always gamble, isn't it? I don't remember you accepting any of my I.O.U.'s the night I lost my ranch."

Keep talking loud and long, Matt thought, and maybe he'll think you're bluffing.

Ferguson had those careful eyes of his fixed on Matt's face, trying to decide if he was bluffing. He stared intently at Matt's hole card, as if he thought he could tell what it was if he only looked at it hard enough.

At last he made up his mind:

"All right," he said abruptly, "the ranch against your dust."

Matt didn't dare breathe. That was just what he had wanted the gambler to say, and he wasn't sure that his ears weren't playing tricks on him.

Then Ferguson jerked his head at the bartender.

"Get the deed to the ranch," he said flatly. Then to Matt, "Is that a bet?"

Quickly, before Ferguson could back down, Matt said, "It's a bet."

Stonefaced, Ferguson turned up his hole card, and a muted groan went up from the watchers. It was an ace. He said, "A pair of jacks with an ace high. Were you bluffing, Matt?"

Matt turned the card over and let him look.

The fourth jack. The case jack, giving him two pairs, sixes and jacks.

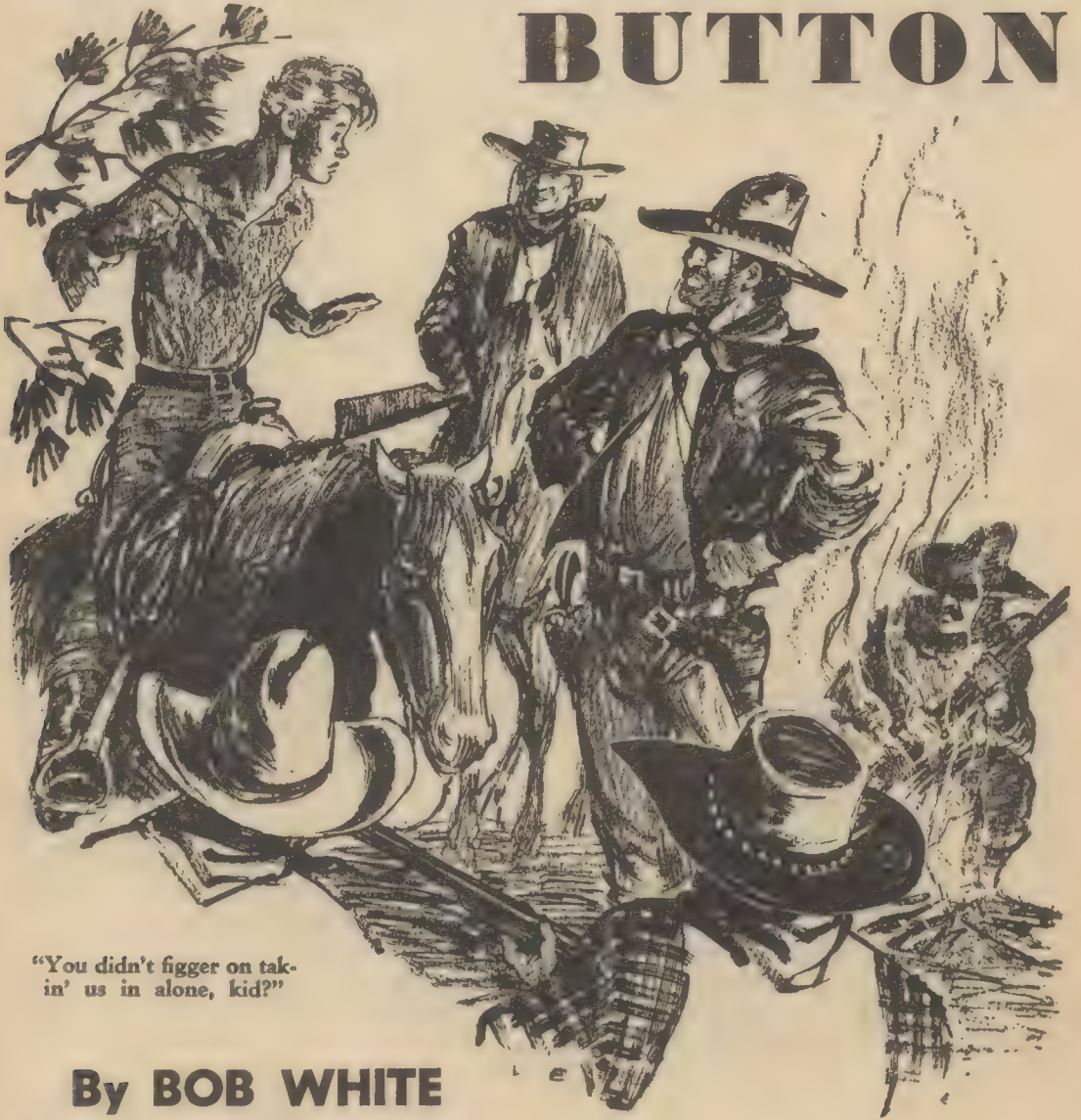
In the uproar that followed, Matt was only conscious of Mr. Sewell pushing his way through to grasp his hand, saying, "Don't you think you ought to get out of here, Matt? Don't you think it's time to go home?"

Home . . . He had almost forgotten what the word meant.

Matt took a deep, thankful breath and let it out slowly. He thought of the ranch that was his again, and of Joan, and of the house and family that they had planned once.

"You're right," he said, grinning at the old man. "A man can't run a ranch from behind a poker table."

BULLETS FOR A BUTTON



"You didn't figger on tak-
in' us in alone, kid?"

By BOB WHITE

RUSTY LATTIMER cautiously made his way through the rough hill country, winding ever upward toward the blanket of pinon that shrouded Karling's camp. All day he had been scouting, and while he'd crossed no sign of the posse, he stayed near cover and took no chances. They might be a day behind, or only a few

miles. In country like this you couldn't tell.

Breaking his own trail, he paused frequently to scan the way ahead. Camp couldn't be much farther. Dillingham might already have him in his sights. This thought gave Rusty little comfort. The Southerner was not only deadly with his long-barrelled

The riding is easy on the Owlhoot, Rusty Lattimer found, because the trail is always downhill.

Virginia rifle, he was also high-strung and trigger-happy. More than once he'd been known to shoot before he looked real good.

Somehow Rusty didn't feel right about the whole setup. Instead of heading for the border after the ambush in Los Cruces, Karling had led them north to the Rimrock country. And to judge from the way he talked, he was no stranger here—which wasn't good either. Rusty was sure that anybody who knew Karling wouldn't be friendly. The outlaw just didn't make friends.

Topping a rise, Rusty came upon a chain of giant boulders a few hundred yards ahead and he slowed his mount. The main trail went dab between them. Rusty could either take to the main trail or go around them, and he didn't want to do either. It was already growing dusk and to go around would take a good half-hour extra, which meant coming into camp, and onto Dillingham, after dark. On the other hand, the pass was high and flat and he'd be visible for miles.

Rusty decided to take a chance on being spotted going through the pass and he slid from his pony. By leading his mount he could hug the walls and take advantage of what little cover there was to be found.

It was because of this precaution that he stumbled unseen upon the stranger who, back to Rusty, crouched amid the rocks. He was intently watching a thin spiral of smoke which curled from out the timber ahead, and Rusty swore silently, damning Karling's carelessness in allowing a daylight fire. The rifleman might be a member of the posse, or he might be merely a local rider, but either way it was bad. Rusty's six-gun slid into his hand.

"Freeze," he ordered softly.

The stranger whirled in surprise and tripped. The rifle clattered out of reach. He remained on one knee, eying Rusty like a trapped chipmunk.

"Hell," Rusty exclaimed, lowering his gun. "Just a yeller-topped kid." He couldn't have been more than fourteen. His face was round and soft, and he had a button nose, but there was a flame in the blue eyes that Rusty understood. Rusty had been about the same age when he blew out all the stops and took to the owlhoot. "Ain't you strayin' quite a ways from home?"

"I can take care of myself," the boy re-

plied with a flare of temper, "when I ain't snook up on."

Rusty nodded good-naturedly. "Speakin' of sneakin', what are you doin' up here, observin' mountain posies?" The kid glanced at the fallen rifle without answering and for a second Rusty expected him to make a dive for it. "Go ahead," he invited, "then I won't be wonderin' what I'm gonna do with you."

The kid straightened and a crafty look came into his eyes. "What are yuh gonna do with me?"

Rusty holstered his gun. That was a good question. Karling wouldn't want to be bothered with a prisoner, especially a fuff-faced kid who'd probably stumbled onto the camp by accident. On the other hand, if Rusty turned him free there was the chance he'd spin a large tale when he reached home.

"What were you doin' up here anyway?" he asked, his voice edged with annoyance.

The kid hesitated. "Lookin' for Bus Karling."

"Karling?" Rusty repeated blankly. "What makes you think he's around here?"

"I saw him."

"And you know Karling?"

"Course I do," the kid answered scornfully.

Rusty's problem was settled right there. He'd have to take the kid in, and once more Rusty mentally cursed Karling for dragging them into the Rimrock instead of the borderlands. Not only was the landscape crawling with a bounty-mad posse, but now they'd have a kid on their hands.

"Hop on that piebald," he ordered wearily, picking up the boy's rifle and climbing onto his own pony, "and ride straight for that smoke up yonder."

THEY hadn't gone a hundred yards when a puff of dust splattered from the trail in front of them, followed by the crack of a rifle.

"Hold it," Rusty yelled, grabbing at the kid's reins. With his other hand he removed his flat-brimmed hat and waved it over his head. The kid paled, realizing what would have happened had he tried to make it up to the camp alone. They sat rigidly until Rusty picked out a tiny white square waving briefly up above. He returned the signal and they moved on.

"What's your name?" he asked sociably.

"Curly."

"Curly what?"

"Curly McCabe."

"What's your old man do, ranch?"

The kid said nothing. He'd lost some of his cocksureness as they neared the camp.

"What do you want with this Karling hombre?" Rusty inquired suddenly. Curly turned and seemed about to speak, then he shook his head and looked away.

"Well," warned Rusty, thinking of his boss, "whatever the reason, it better be good."

Karling himself was waiting as they rode into camp. He was large, larger than Rusty, and his dusty jacket stretched tightly across wide shoulders. It had been many days since he'd shaved and a beard which began under cold emotionless eyes dropped like a black curtain to his chin. Only a crooked nose and full lips broke through the matting.

Dillingham, the slender dark Southerner, leaned nervously against a rock, his rifle cradled between his arms. Two other men squatted silently before a coffee pot slung over the fire. It was a rough crew, but Karling dominated the scene. He stood before the arrivals, feet spread and arms hanging loosely at his side, his eyes on the boy.

"Hello, Bus," the boy said uneasily, breaking the cold silence.

"Why'd you bring him here?" Karling asked in a deep angry voice, not removing his eyes from Curly McCabe.

"He was almost here when I found him," Rusty answered. "He was followin' the smoke from that damn fire."

"What were you lookin' for?" Karling addressed the boy for the first time.

"You," Curly replied frankly.

One of the men from the fire came up. He was short, redfaced, and badly scarred about the mouth. He snorted shrilly and screwed his little face into a leer. "Fixin' to collect the reward money like a real little man."

He reached for the boy's leg and began to yank him from the piebald. "I'll fix him real quicklike."

Karling grabbed the little man by the back of his jacket and pulled him backward so that he sprawled across the edge of the fire. He rolled free with a cry of fear and beat madly at his singed clothing.

Dillingham, who had watched the scene, laughed mockingly at the little red-faced

man. "Finally find someone your own size, Pinky?"

"Get down," Karling commanded and Curly slid nervously to the ground. "You didn't figger on takin' us in alone?"

The boy didn't answer and Karling stepped forward and slapped him across the face. "Speak up. What were you fixin' to do?"

The boy held his hand against the red welt on his cheek. "I kinda hoped to join up." The blow had hurt and he stiffened as if he expected another to follow.

Dillingham laughed again and Karling silenced him with a bleak glance. "How'd you know I was back?"

Rusty had dismounted and unsaddled his horse. He now stood looking on. "You know this kid?" he asked curiously.

"He's a McCabe." Karling said the words between clenched teeth.

Rusty shrugged. The boy had told him that much. He glanced at Curly McCabe, trembling before the angry, black-bearded outlaw, and felt a little sorry for him. But it was none of his business what Karling did now. He pulled a sack of tobacco from his shirt pocket and began to roll a smoke.

"How'd you know I'd come back?" Karling repeated.

"The posse come through early this mornin' and Pa said he bet you was up here somewheres."

"He told the posse that?"

"Course not. Just Mom and me."

The last man who had been sitting by the fire got slowly to his feet. Long gray hair spilled from under his slouch hat and his wrinkled face was spattered with gray stubble. "Send him back to his ma," he advised. "This ain't no outfit for a young'un."

"You can't send him back now," Dillingham objected, moving up to the fire. He fingered his rifle. "Ain't but one thing we can rightly do."

"Potluck's right," Rusty spoke up without meaning to. "He oughta be sent back."

"I'm gonna let him stay," Karling decided thoughtfully. "He's got twice Pinky's guts." He glanced scornfully at the little man cowering beyond the circle of the fire. "And Potluck here ain't got much longer to go." His lips pulled down into a bitter smile. "Al McCabe'll be right proud of his yaller-headed kid."

"We ain't got no right to decide the kid's life," Potluck protested.

"His old man decided mine." Karling's jaw hardened and he turned to the kid. "Your folks know where you are?"

Curly shook his head. "They think I went to the Circle 3 across the flats."

Rusty turned to the fire. He wished Karling had let the kid go back home. He thought of his own youth. If there'd been somebody to send him back he might have a ranch of his own by now, maybe even a wife and kids. Rusty kicked a partly burned stick back onto the fire. The boy would just have to learn through experience. It was none of his business. "If he stays with us let's ride. Now. I say we've fooled around enough in this damn rimrock country."

KARLING spat into the fire. "I'm sendin' him back home tonight. He can get us information about the bank, maybe the posse, too, and join us later."

"We can't trust him," Pinky whined. "He'll bring 'em all in on us."

"I don't like it none either," Dillingham spoke up. "I ain't anxious to wrap my neck around a piece of hemp."

"Shut up, all of you," Karling commanded, his huge fists clenched. "I know what I'm doin'. Why do you think I came to the Rimrock 'stead of headin' for the border?"

The firelight made red sparks dance in his smouldering black eyes. "They ran me out once. But I'm back, and Al McCabe, he—" He walked away from the fire and then returned. "Saddle my horse, Pinky," he ordered savagely. "We'll take the kid part way."

Pinky scurried away to the horses like a monkey. Suddenly there was swearing and a palamino reared back, screaming and pawing at the air.

Old Potluck was on his feet in a flash. He bounded across the fire and disappeared in the darkness. There was a shriek from Pinky, and then silence. Dillingham faded in the direction of the horses and Rusty heard a dry thud.

In a moment Dillingham was back, dragging Pinky along over the ground by his collar. "Damn old Potluck was choking him." The little man's face was now almost blue and his mouth hung open. "Almost bent my

rifle makin' him let go. Knocked him from here to yonder."

Rusty dodged among the horses and found the old man sprawled on the ground. He lifted him gently and carried him near the fire. Blood spilled down over his face from a gash in his forehead. Rusty balled up his neckerchief and held it against the wound. Potluck was out cold, but he was still alive.

Karling watched the whole thing with indifference. When Pinky sat up dizzily, Karling kicked him with his boot. "Go on, get the horses saddled. We ain't got all night."

The boy came over and looked down on Potluck and Rusty. His face was sickly white. Evidently he wasn't used to blood and violence.

Rusty made a pillow for the old man with a jacket. Then he got to his feet and hitched at his gunbelt. "Dillingham," he said with cold fury, "you ever touch Potluck again and I'll shoot you apart, bone by bone."

"Think you can do it?" the Southerner grinned, turning so that the rifle pointed in Rusty's direction.

"I can do it," Rusty promised. "Right now if you like."

Dillingham's rifle wavered and some of the sureness ebbed from his face.

"Stop it," Karling cut in. "We got work to do. Get saddled."

"I'm stayin' behind with Potluck," Rusty replied, turning his back and kneeling by the old man.

Karling stepped forward, towering over Rusty. "Lattimer," he said softly, "you ain't taken kindly to orders since you joined up. Mebbe we oughta settle it right here and now."

Rusty got to his feet warily. He'd never feared the big man as the others did, but he held a healthy respect for Karling.

"Suit yourself," Rusty replied, his nerves tingling. He glanced beyond the outlaw and saw Dillingham, a smile of hungry anticipation on his arrogant face. Beside him stood Pinky, his scar glowing in the firelight.

Karling's lips twitched, and then he turned suddenly away. Perhaps he saw that there was nothing to be gained by killing Rusty, or maybe he wasn't yet ready to put his skill on the line. And there was more important business ahead. Hopping onto his pony, he motioned to the others and they disappeared into the night.

RUSTY sat down with a relieved sigh. But it wasn't over. Sooner or later he must buckle down to Karling or face his guns.

"That was close," old Potluck whispered and Rusty started at his voice.

"Yuh got a bad cut there," Rusty admitted.

"I mean you," the old man insisted. "Karling is one of the few real gunmen I ever seen. You was just plumb lucky. Ain't nobody I ever heerd of can beat him."

"Someone'll take his measure," Rusty replied.

"You won't live to see it. Nor me either." He wriggled to make himself comfortable and stared up into the starless sky. "How come you ain't never settled down? Course you only been with us a month or so and it ain't fur me to ask."

Rusty shrugged. "I tried it. About a dozen times I reckon. But somebody always shows up with a long memory and I gotta light out." He took a stick and made marks in the dirt. "A man's gotta live no matter what side of the law he's on."

"Why don't you skip out—go up into the new country in Montana?"

"Why don't you?" Rusty countered.

"I'm gonna, boy. I'm gonna." He felt his forehead gingerly. "Just one more job, then I'm headin' for Montana. Got me a place already staked out. Good water, good grazin', good rich land."

Rusty laughed bitterly. "One more job. That's what we all say. What'd you wanna tangle with Pinky for?"

The old man swore. "I done told that rat-faced sneak I'd kill him if he touched that palamino a mine. It's about all I got in this world and I love that horse like we was related." He breathed heavily with excitement. "I'd a done it too but for Dillingham. That Pinky's a cowardly cuss."

"You been with Karling a long time?"

"A long time," Potluck admitted. "I rode for him and for his pappy before him. They owned the old J Bar J right here in the Rimrock. When young Karling was run out I went along."

"What happened?"

Potluck sighed. "A woman, a course. She decided on Al McCabe, which caused Karling to get likkered up one afternoon. He went after Al, the sheriff tried to stop him and got killed. Al got up a posse and Karling lit

out. I went up to Montana for a spell and run across him there. He talked me into comin' back."

Rusty swore. "You mean we came all this way, a posse on our heels, just to help Karling settle a old grudge?"

"There's money in it too," Potluck replied easily. "Al was always a hard worker, and kinda smart besides. He got a bank started and it went over real big. Along about now with the cattle marketed, it oughta be pretty full. That's the way Karling has got it figgered, anyhow."

"And this kid we got, Curly—I reckon he's Al's boy?"

"Yep."

Rusty wondered what McCabe might be like. He was in for a big loss, not only his money but his kid beside. "It's risky," he mused aloud. "The posse is still in these parts, and Rimrock is sure going to be alert."

The old man struggled to a sitting position. "Let's skip out tonight. Now. My heart just ain't in this deal. I wasn't foolin' about that place in Montana. We ain't gonna find nothin' here but trouble. I can feel it comin'."

Rusty was sorely tempted. He was sick of running. Every time he saw a ranch it was with envy and regret. Someday it would all end when he picked up slugs from a posse, or from Karling himself.

"What d'ya say?" Potluck urged eagerly. "We can have a good two-hour jump on 'em. They won't even look for us."

Rusty pictured the curly-headed McCabe kid riding with Karling's band and he thought again of his own unhappy and misdirected youth. Once a single shot was fired the kid would be lost—too late to turn back. It was too bad, but none of Rusty's business.

"You're in no shape to travel tonight with that head," Rusty sighed wearily. "Let's grab some rest."

FOR two days they waited. Dillingham was more nervous than ever, Pinky more suspicious, and Potluck less talkative. They took turns guarding the trail. Karling seemed confident and assured, but he had little to say. Once Rusty spotted a band of horsemen moving to the east and he assumed that the posse was still looking. Every one of Karling's men had a price on his head, enough to make looking worth

while to a man who didn't object to killing.

On the third morning Dillingham reported that the boy was riding upward toward camp alone.

"I don't like it," Pinky whined. "I don't trust him. It might easy be a trap."

"I'll do the decidin'," Karling said firmly. "If it's ripe for us to hit the bank the kid will let us know."

"You ain't takin' him along?" Potluck asked hopefully.

"He goes along. Now shut up about it." Karling checked the shells in his two big guns.

Rusty kept his own mouth shut. He recognized that getting revenge against McCabe had become an obsession with Karling and argument would only make it worse. And Rusty still toyed with the idea of lighting out for Montana some day. There was no point in endangering it with an outright clash with the outlaw. It seemed settled that the boy would incriminate himself by taking part in the robbery and that was that.

Dillingham brought the kid into camp and Rusty noticed that the boy was pale and had difficulty in keeping his lips from trembling. From somewhere in his subconscious, Rusty heard a danger signal buzz.

"I changed my mind," the boy blurted to Karling. "I just wanna stay home with Mom and Pa. I'm sorry I messed things up for yuh."

The outlaw laughed mockingly. "Hell's bells, boy, you can't change your mind. Get down offa that horse. We've already wasted enough time waitin'."

Curly got down clumsily and faced Karling. "I ain't gonna have nothin' to do with holdin' up Pa's bank."

Karling's hand shot out suddenly, slapping the kid's head back and forth until he stumbled to the ground. He sat there, vainly trying to hold back tears of rage and humiliation.

"Don't try crossin' me again," the outlaw warned, standing over him. "The posse still around?"

The boy shook his head mutely.

"How about the bank—is your pa carryin' most of the market money this year?"

"I don't know," Curly replied doggedly, blinking his eyes hard.

"Well," Karling shrugged, "I guess I can make your old lady talk."

"All the ranchers about gave Pa their

money," the kid replied quickly. "I heard him tell Mom." He struggled to get to his feet and Pinky sent him back down with a cuff to the ear.

"Keep your filthy hands offa that kid," Potluck warned, advancing.

Pinky retreated, holding up his arm defensively. "He's leadin' us into a trap," he whined. "He's sold us out just like I always thought."

Rusty kept a check on his anger. Karling hadn't really hurt the boy. But he was building up the boy's hatred, and Rusty was glad for that. If he hated Karling enough he wouldn't be apt to follow in his steps.

"How about it, Karling?" Dillingham asked quietly, a deceptive smile twisting his lips. "We can't drag a snivelin' brat into the bank with us. You ride on ahead and let me handle him. He ain't no use to us now."

The outlaw considered this thoughtfully, then he shook his head. "I want him along when we hit the trail. I want his folks to know what we turned him into." He laughed mirthlessly. "They'll be right proud of him back here in the Rimrock."

"It's gonna be a trap," Pinky warned again. "The brat's tipped 'em off we're a comin'. Let's get outa here while we can still do it."

"Shut up and get the horses," Karling ordered angrily. "Or maybe you don't wanna go along with us?"

Pinky hesitated until Karling's hand dropped to his gun, then he bobbed his head vigorously. "I'll go along," he decided instantly. "I wanna go. I'm all set to go."

"How about the kid," Dillingham insisted. "How we gonna handle it?" He leaned back against the crotch of a pinon. "Maybe he has tipped them off down in town. It ain't impossible."

"It's a chance we're gonna take," Karling answered, climbing onto the horse Pinky had brought up. "What do you expect me to do?"

"Tie the kid up somewhere and come back after him," the Southerner replied. "We can't be bothered with the kid down there, that's for sure."

"All right, damn it," Karling scowled. "We'll stow him down in the foothills and pick him up on the way back by."

"If it ain't a trap," Dillingham added.

The outlaw faced him squarely. "Get

this straight. If it turns out a trap I'll handle him in my own way—in a way this valley won't never forget. But don't you make the mistake of doin' it."

Dillingham flushed, then he shrugged carelessly. "You're the boss."

Pinky scrambled onto his pony as if he were afraid of being left behind. Rusty reached down and helped the still sitting boy to his feet and watched while he mounted his piebald. The kid had guts, he decided. Most youngsters would be bawling their heads off about now.

Potluck came over to Rusty. "Let's make a break for it," he said in a low voice. "It's all wrong. I can feel it in my bones, and my feelin's ain't never been wrong yet. In two weeks we kin be in Montana."

"What about the kid?"

The old man shook his head. "Ain't nothin' we kin do to help him now. We're goners sure if we show our face in Rimrock. Believe me, boy, we're goners."

Rusty lifted himself onto his pony. "You make a break for it. Maybe I'll join you up there some day—if my luck holds out. I brought the kid into camp in the first place. I might be able to mebbe keep him from gettin' hurt right off."

"I'll ride along," Potluck decided glumly. He patted his horse and slid into the saddle. "I reckon it's too late to turn back anyhow."

THEY caught up with the others and the six of them wound down the trail in silence. They reached the base of the foot-hills and pulled up in a grove of cottonwoods along the edge of a dry creek-bed.

Karling tightened the thongs on his holsters. "Town ain't but about four miles down the creek and there's nothin' but broken country between here and there. The bank is in the middle of the first block on the west side of the street next to a barber shop. There's a big sign out front. All you gotta do is follow me."

"Suppose we get split up?" Rusty asked.

"We meet right here. I know a trail a mountain goat would get lost on. One more thing, don't be shootin' up the bank unless you have to. I'm gonna leave word there about the kid being in with us."

"We're takin' a lot of chances over that damn kid," Dillingham grumbled.

Karling turned to Rusty. "Lattimer, this is the first job yuh ever been on with us. We'll see just how good yuh are."

"Maybe we'll see how good everyone is," Rusty replied easily.

"Tie up the kid," Karling commanded. Pinky slipped down and went over to the boy. He began to yank at the boy's legs, then his eye caught Potluck's palamino and he let go quickly. "Get down," he said sullenly.

Rusty watched silently while they bound and gagged the lad and drug him into a small hollow between some rocks. Curly wouldn't be comfortable there, but he'd be safe. For the time being.

"He's liable to die there if we don't get back," Potluck pointed out.

"That's the idea," Karling agreed. "If he's set a trap and we all get killed, he'll die and rot right there."

"Loosen his feet ropes," Rusty ordered angrily. "We might get chased the other way. He won't have time to get away durin' the short time we'll be gone."

"Still makin' trouble?" Karling inquired dangerously.

"No," Rusty shot back, "but we got no call yet to make it rough on the kid."

"All right," Karling agreed stonily. He nodded to Pinky to free Curly's feet. "You get your way now because this other thing's more important to me than you are. But we're gonna settle it. That's a promise."

Rusty swung his pony in beside Potluck's palamino without answering and they all started down the creekbed.

"I reckon it's good-by Montana," the old man sighed with a last look behind.

Rusty felt uneasy about the whole thing too. The boy could easily have tipped off his folks—Rusty wouldn't have blamed him a bit. But if he had, would he have come back to camp? Rusty didn't know. A kid that age had funny loyalties. Of only one thing was Rusty certain. This would be his last and only ride with Karling's band.

They were maybe halfway to Rimrock when the first trouble struck. Potluck's palamino stumbled in the soft creekbed sand and fell. Potluck rolled to his feet uninjured, but the horse had difficulty in getting to its feet. Potluck walked her a few yards, his wrinkled face anxious. The palamino hobbled along on three legs.

"Is it broken?" Rusty asked, coming over.

Potluck examined the foot carefully, then shook his head in relief. "Sprained is all."

Karling swore loudly. "Well, hop up behind Pinky. Leave the nag here and we'll pick up the first one we come to in town."

"I ain't leaving' her behind," Potluck replied in a shocked voice. "She's the only thing I got in this world. Ride on without me. Mebbe I can meet yuh in Las Vegas this fall."

"Get up behind Pinky," Karling roared.

"Nope," the old man said firmly. "I ain't leavin'."

"Get up behind Pinky or I'll shoot that horse through the head." There wasn't the slightest doubt that he would do it.

"That's what I figured," Potluck said craftily. When he straightened his own gun was in his hand. "Ride on, mister. I'd a heap rather see you shot than this horse."

Karling's lips worked in helpless rage. He raked his pony savagely with his spurs. "Let's go."

Rusty half-smiled to the old man as he passed by and Potluck raised his hand in a farewell salute. "Look me up in Montana."

Rusty nodded without heart. Old Potluck would be the first to be nailed by the posse. He couldn't make any time at all on foot.

A short distance from town the four of them turned off the creek-bed and onto the main trail. The main drag was dusty and deserted. There wasn't even a horse in sight.

"It looks unnatural," Dillingham observed. "Seems as though somebody ought to be around."

"We're just lucky," Karling answered. "No one to stop us. I been lookin' forward to this for a long time and it's workin' out just right. Remember what I said about not killin' anyone inside the bank. I don't care about outside."

Rusty eyed the twin rows of unpainted buildings critically as they approached. Every sense was alert to possible danger. Dillingham was right. It wasn't natural for a town to look that empty.

THEY were almost even with the first building when it all started. Rusty saw the sun reflect from the top of a roof and he yanked hard on his pony's reins. "Watch it!" he yelled, his hand streaking to his gun.

"It's a trap!" Pinky screamed as a rifle

shot rang out. There was another crack and Pinky pitched forward to the ground, still screaming.

Suddenly a man appeared in the street, his arms waving wildly. "Wait," he yelled to the hidden men behind him. "Don't kill 'em. They got Curly somewhere."

"That's McCabe," Karling shouted madly, raising his gun. But he was too late. Dillingham fired without even raising the rifle to his shoulder and McCabe spun and fell, his hand clutched to his shoulder.

The street began to fill with gunsmoke as guns pushed from every doorway, blasting out a hail of lead and death. Karling cursed and raved as his bucking horse kept him from pumping lead into the fallen man in the street.

Rusty gained the protection of the first building without ever firing a shot. From the corner of his eye he saw Dillingham stiffen in the saddle and fall, his head and body riddled.

Karling, like Rusty, whirled away from the fusillade and he now rode swiftly in the direction of the creekbed. Rusty slipped his gun back into its holster and took off after the fleeing gunman. He was riding for his life and he knew it. Every yard gained now spelled the difference. For the moment he forgot about both Curly and Potluck.

Karling had enough start to make it almost impossible for Rusty to catch up. His pony had power and stamina—it could outlast nine out of ten bigger horses, but it was no ball of fire. He pounded off the trail and down into the creekbed. Only then did he venture a look back over his shoulder. The expected pursuit had not yet developed.

The boy had trapped them and they'd walked right into it. And that explained the absence of horses. The townsmen had been so confident they hadn't readied their mounts. That was a break, but only a small one.

Riding hard and taking short cuts, Rusty managed to keep in the running. The clump of cottonwoods came into sight and he rode straight toward them. Far to his left he caught sight of a distant figure leading a horse. Old Potluck. A little more time and he might have made it to the foothills.

Karling had already dismounted when Rusty pounded up. The outlaw was breathing heavily and his black eyes held a half-crazed gleam. He looked at Rusty briefly,

then turned suddenly and ran to the spot where the boy was hidden.

Rusty slid to the ground. "Karling," he shouted. "Let the kid go. We still got a chance of making the tall timber."

Karling reappeared, dragging the kid behind him, ignoring Rusty's shouts. "They won't never forget me in the Rimrock," he panted.

There was no mistaking Karling's intentions. Whether he escaped or not, he would get his revenge. Rusty's heart began to sink as he saw a cloud of dust rise in the distance. They were lost unless they left at once. Every second counted. He felt an insane desire to hop onto his horse and run, to escape while he could. Then he saw Karling's boot raised, ready to stamp out the boy's face.

"Karling!" he yelled, diving forward. He knocked the outlaw off balance, but it was Rusty who fell to the ground.

"You done your last meddling, Lattimer," Karling said hoarsely, as Rusty rolled to his feet. "I'm gonna kill you and the kid both."

Rusty crouched on his knees, waiting. Behind the outlaw he could see the dust cloud growing. It didn't much matter now. Karling would get him first. If the posse hurried they might save the boy. But for Rusty it was already over. Time seemed to stand still. He was aware of the blueness of the sky, the sound of a bird somewhere in the cottonwoods, the smell of the dry, rich earth. Things he had never noticed before. And suddenly he knew he didn't want to die, that he was going to fight until the last breath.

He tensed, ready to spring the moment Karling went for his guns. Then his fists closed over loose gravel and the thought was born. A chance in a thousand. With a wierd scream he leaped up, throwing the gravel in the gunman's face. Karling stepped back, startled, his hands going instinctively to his face. And in that moment Rusty drew.

Rusty needed that extra time. The outlaw already had his guns in hand as Rusty

fired. For a long moment Karling stared, an uncomprehending look on his bearded face, unable to raise the gunfilled hands which hung ape-like at his sides. Then he twisted and crumpled to the ground.

Rusty dropped the gun back into place. He felt stunned. The impossible had happened. But it was too late. He shook his head sharply and dropped down beside the boy to free his ropes. "Are you all right, Kid?"

The kid nodded without speaking.

Rusty hauled him to his feet. "Then hop on that piebald and ride for home."

The boy looked his disbelief. "You mean I'm free—after what I done?"

"That's right. Get goin'."

The boy looked once at the dead Karling, then back to Rusty. "I sure thank you, Rusty. I won't forget." For a moment Rusty thought he was going to be sick, then he turned and ran for the piebald hidden in the trees.

Rusty watched him ride toward the approaching posse. Then he took his pony's reins and led it back towards the thicker part of the cottonwood clump. He'd at least make his last stand in the shade. He patted the pony's neck. There was no point in racing it across the foothills for nothing. Potluck had called it right. They had all been doomed, the "hull bunch of 'em."

He saw the horsemen stop and talk to the kid. They probably thought he was crazy for not holding the boy as hostage. Maybe he was. It didn't matter now and he felt no regrets. Then the horsemen moved, but to the right, away from old Potluck, away from the clump of cottonwoods.

Rusty sighed a prayer. Bless the kid. He was sending them on a wild-geese chase. He remained motionless for a long time. Then he climbed on his pony and rode out of the cottonwoods, toward the foothills. It would be easy to overtake Potluck, but Montana was sure going to be a long way to lead a horse.

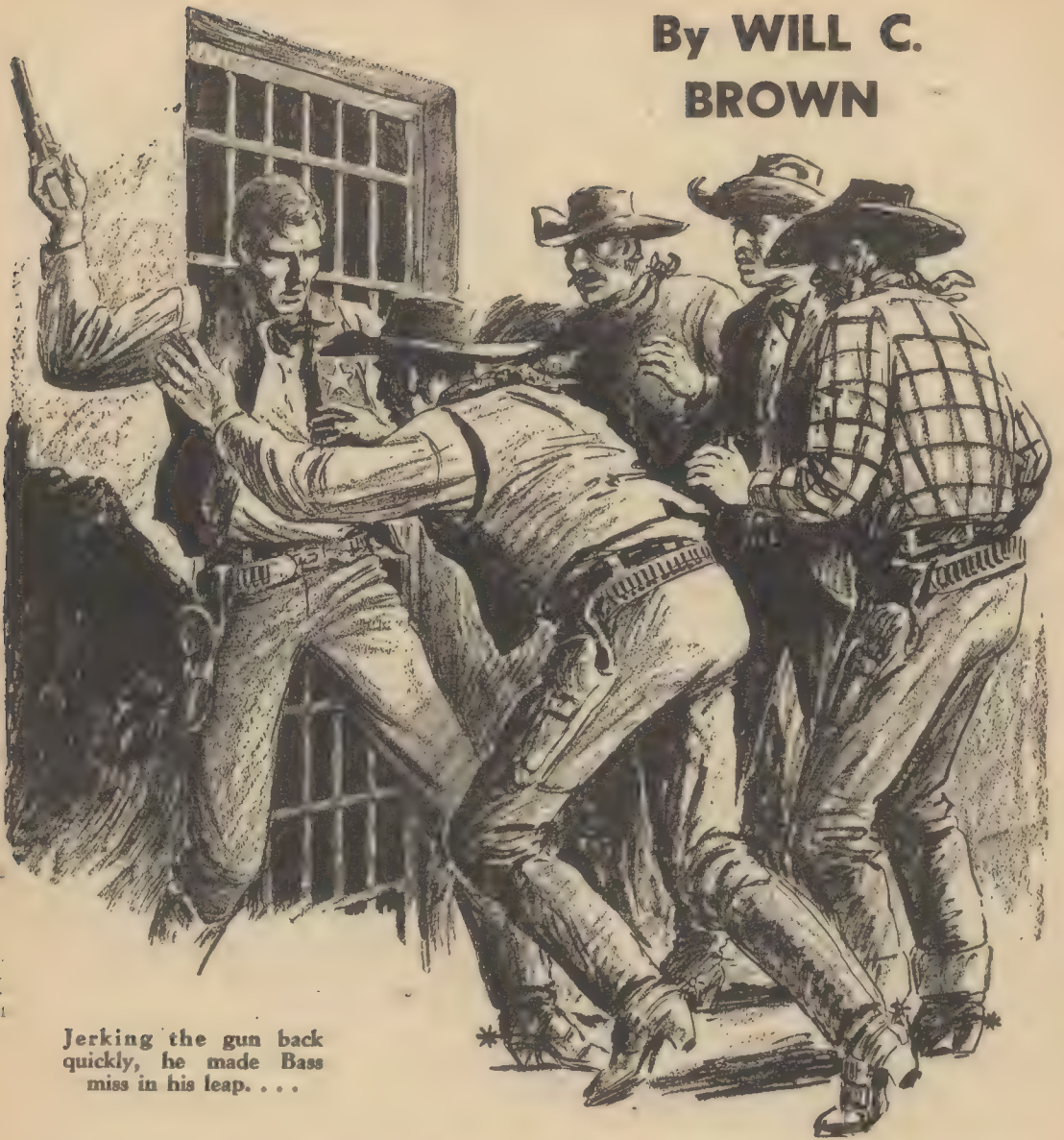
LINE OF FIRE

During the Indian wars the infantry and cavalry usually traversed the plains in long narrow columns, two abreast, or at times in single file. This because Indians rarely tried to cut through a line. Invariably they circled or stabbed at the flanks.



—J. W. Q.

By WILL C.
BROWN



Jerking the gun back quickly, he made Bass miss in his leap. . . .

Embattled, Deputy Sheriff Frey flung a challenge at the snarling mob: "Any time you boys want to take the law into your own hands —I'll take my sixguns in mine!"

MOB FEVER

BY FIVE o'clock the carpentry job was finished and the young deputy refitted the boards in the office floor and carefully swept up all traces of sawdust and splinters. So far as he could see, the sawed edges did not show. A low moaning sound came from across the hallway. He turned to observe the prisoner. The man behind the barred door was sweating too, his eyes holding a frightened, watchful

stare as he whirled to face the deputy.

"We'll fool 'em, Gonzales," Frey said. He motioned to the floor and forced a hearty tone. "Under there. You just take it easy now, and we'll fool 'em."

But inside, he was not so sure. Nesbitt would be hard to fool.

He walked down the hallway, boots thudding uncommonly loud in the hollow stillness. He pushed against the timbered back door to estimate its security. Then he swung the inner iron door closed and twisted with both hands to turn the thick key. He plodded back to the office in unhurried long-legged strides. At the window, he gulped in a deep breath to fill lungs but found no freshness in it. The prairie air lay motionless like a steamy blanket over the silent town.

By six o'clock, the long street was nearly empty, although horses lined the hitch racks all the way from Parkinson's store to the Bender Saloon. Frey could see no sign, now, of women or children.

He thought he could almost taste a rancid heaviness in the air as if it were weighted by lynch-mob purpose, seeping everywhere from the distant Bender. He could see them, almost—men stoking their phony fire of courage, priming their intentions with whiskey and with throaty talk of justice and defiant profanity.

The way they would do it, Frey considered, would be simple. They would likely send a spokesman again, Nesbitt or somebody, with an ultimatum. Then they would drink up their frenzy some more. When it started, mob fever would boil over fast. They would rush the gate, after the spark of mere talk had fanned into consuming flames of the kill lust. And they would shoot their way in. If he put up a fight, they would kill him.

They would be crazy men, for a little while. And they would drag the terrified prisoner to the street and hang him until his voice and his struggles were stilled, and only a shapeless thing with folded head dangled like an old sack from a tree limb.

Only, Gonzales would not be in that cell when they came. He would be cramped down there through the new trapdoor, in the sub-floor under the sheriff's office. Near suffocating, but out of sight. And maybe, Frey thought, he could convince them, as he had already lied to their first demands,

that Sheriff Blake had slipped Gonzales away to the Fort City jail. The final possibility, the chance that they would go crazy enough to fire the building, was one he wouldn't think about.

He wished, for the hundredth time that day, that Sheriff Blake was there. But it was his prisoner, now, and his problem. He had made it that way when he threw his gun on Nesbitt and took over the prisoner.

He saw the spokesmen when they headed up the street from the Bender. They came at a deliberate gait and soon he recognized them. Artie Shutt was the thickest one in the baggy clothes, and the tall man in the black suit and dilapidated hat was Jeb Hickman.

FREY whispered a caution to Gonzales. He went to the front and let himself out the iron-barred gate to meet the men on the low plank steps. He faced them, turning slightly to keep his hip gun away. After a look at the puffy eyes of Artie Shutt and a whiff of the whiskered man's breath fumes, he gave his attention to Jeb Hickman.

"Nesbitt sent us," Hickman said. "They're saying—"

"The answer's still the same," Frey spoke shortly. "Like I told them, Blake slipped him off to Fort City for safekeeping. He'll be tried in court."

"Quit givin' us that damn line!" Artie Shutt snarled. "We know he's in here and we're gonna—"

"Easy, Artie," drawled Hickman. "Son, listen to me—you're just one man. There's forty or more of 'em down at the Bender and they've made their mind up. You're a green deputy. They been around here a long time and they been used to dealing out their own justice, way before this county was organized. That was a cold-blooded murder and that tramp rider Gonzales was caught dead to rights. So don't play mighty about it. They're plain going to hang him, which is what the law would say do anyhow, and they're going to do it whether you like it or not. No use you getting yourself hurt."

The deputy looked speculatively at Hickman. Hickman was bitten by the mob urge, he thought, like the others. Most days, he was an ordinary kind of man, several cuts above Artie Shutt in intelligence. But he

was fired up with mob fever now. He wanted to hang a man.

"Hickman, I'm not trying to change whatever opinion you've got. But we're not sure Gonzales got caught red-handed. He tells a reasonable story. Mr. Absher was by here the other day, saying he was having bad trouble with somebody—and it wasn't Gonzales."

"Yeah? What you aimin' to be, Frey, a lawyer and a deputy both?"

"Maybe Gonzales happened along," Frey said patiently, "and plumb stepped into a trap. Maybe the man that shot Clint Absher planned it that way. Anyhow, Gonzales is not here."

"How about we just go in and take a look?" Shutt demanded.

Frey turned and looked at him. "I reckon that would be all right. Only I would want to lock you up, Shutt, once you ever got in there. Force of habit—you been our guest right often, I recollect, for one thing or another."

Shutt's fat jaw tightened and the reddish pig eyes blinked.

"That crowd down there's about out of hand," Hickman spoke hurriedly. "Nesbitt is—"

"He's building it up, isn't he? You think it's because Nesbitt thought so much of Clint Absher?"

"Well, they were neighbors. And he caught Gonzales. And he don't like the high-handed way you took Gonzales from him this morning at the point of a gun."

"They were neighbors, all right. But they were hardly speaking. Nesbitt and Absher wrangled over everything—fences, water and brands. Anybody stopped to ask why Gonzales would ambush Absher and shoot him in the back? Gonzales just worked around here and there for handout jobs. He's not smart. He wouldn't even be in this jam if he'd run like a smart man would, instead of just standing there in the brush with Absher's body till Nesbitt and some of his men came along. But you just——"

"Aw, this damn palaver!" Shutt spat to one side through stained whiskers without taking his hot glare off Frey.

Then he called Frey a name.

Frey hit him. He was an angular man, almost ungainly, but his arm movement was ripping smooth. The smash of his fist to

Shutt's open face made a vicious *smack* sound. Shutt's eyes rolled blank and his knees buckled. He stumbled a step and fell in the warm dust.

They looked down at him.

"You shouldn't have done that," Hickman mumbled.

Frey rubbed where the blood traces tinted his knuckles.

"Take him away from here!" he breathed.

"You're making a mighty bad mistake, young fellow. What'll it get you?"

"Hickman, I saw the eyes of that Gonzales when—before Blake took him away. If you're locked behind bars and helpless, I guess mob talk's not pretty to hear."

"Not pretty, either, to get waylaid like Clint Absher was. Folks are not going to stand for a thing like that."

"Maybe lynching was all right once, when this was a wild country. But it always seemed to me it was like a bunch of animals ganged up and jumping on another animal because it was crippled or weak or something. Like you say, I'm just a green deputy, but I hired out to do a certain job. Way I understand it, I protect any prisoner I might have in custody."

Artie Shutt groaned and collected himself to a sitting position. They looked down at him for a moment. Frey glanced past, toward the town, late shadowed now, and still deserted. His friends, he thought, the reasonable citizens, were not getting themselves involved. If they were not caught up by the mob spirit, they were staying as far away as they could get. That was why a mob would be mostly the wild, tough ones, or drunk trash like Shutt, suddenly swelled with a bloated sense of doing justice.

Hickman said, accusingly, "Who protected Clint Absher when them slugs busted him in the back?"

"You're smarter than most of that scum down at the Bender, Hickman. Neither man laws nor God A'mighty intended for any poor human to be dragged out kicking and screaming, by a bunch of drunk no-account roughts, and strangled to death with a lariat rope—whether he murdered anybody or not."

"That's your final word, is it?"

"That, and this—they're not storming down here and taking this jail apart. They start that and I'll be in there at the win-

dow, holding a Winchester in my hands."

"Don't make no challenge like that, son," Hickman frowned. "That kind of talk would be as good as they'd want." Hickman eyed him narrowly and spoke insistently. "You still want to claim Gonzales ain't in there?"

Frey looked him in the eye. "You go get Nesbitt and one or two others." He nodded a taut jaw down at Shutt. "Don't bring any drunk like him. You can lay your guns on the step and I'll let you in my jail. You can see Gonzales is not here."

He stepped backward inside, pulled the gate closed and locked it, then let himself in at the heavy iron door.

IN THE office, he sat in the sheriff's chair and took off his hat. He ran slim fingers through saddle-brown hair, feeling it damp, and then stared at the knuckles where they were bruised. Across the hallway he could see Gonzales on the bunk edge, face down in his hands.

When he had first heard of the killing, and had ridden out to Absher's place, he had not realized how much he would regret that Sheriff Blake was in Fort City for a visit. Taking Gonzales out of the hands of Nesbitt and his rough crew had been strain enough, with that tense moment of gun play when Nesbitt belligerently declared he was keeping Gonzales for a proper lynching. But he'd got his prisoner, and—to now—he had held him. But he knew of no way to get it over to that fired-up crowd that Gonzales, very likely, was the victim of a bald frameup.

He unlocked the door of the cell and touched Gonzales on the shoulder. The man's face was a gray mask of fear. When the floor boards were lifted, he squirmed swiftly into the space and out of sight.

"Don't make a sound," Frey warned. "No matter what happens, you be quiet."

He was refitting the boards when he heard a pounding at the gate and the coarse shout of his name.

There were four of them and he looked them over carefully. Nesbitt was planted spraddle-legged in front. Behind him, Frey saw Jeb Hickman, Tom Dorbandt and Emil Bass.

The deputy lowered his lantern and brought out the gate key.

"Your guns—lay them on the steps."

They complied too willingly, he thought;

there was not even one mumbled protest.

"Open your coat, Nesbitt."

Nesbitt worked his thick lips. He looked uncertainly from Frey to the others, then slowly pulled open his coat. The shoulder holster trappings showed. Frey nodded at it, without speaking, and Nesbitt drew the short revolver from his armpit.

"Put that with the others," the deputy said. "The sheriff's standing orders."

He turned the key. Then, a new and ominous sound reached across the early evening. They were forming down there, spilling out of the Bender Saloon, drawing fringes of new spectators from the town. The whole milling mass would spread itself like gangrene, and as the numbers swelled, so would the hanging fever, infecting them all. At the last, there would be no sanity anywhere.

Frey stood back. They shoved past him. He watched Nesbitt, in the yellow glow of the lighted coaloil lamps, when the big man peered into the empty cell. Nesbitt muttered something to the others. Frey could see they would not let that one look satisfy them.

He watched silently as they ransacked the sheriff's quarters in the rear, Frey's own bunk room, the closets and the kitchen. After a while, they came back to the office.

"Pretty smart, ain't you?" Emil Bass growled. "Where you got him hid?" Bass' dusty boots were planted exactly on the cracks of the trapdoor next to the sheriff's desk. When he moved, Frey thought he could hear the boards squeak. He tore his eyes off Bass and watched Nesbitt.

The big man's brush-heavy brows were drawn down in intense study. He looked about at the walls, the floor, up to the ceiling. Frey caught himself holding his breath. He relaxed, leaning against the door facing. What if they decided to go over every inch of the floor?

They heard the advancing sounds. All of them stood quiet, listening.

The crowd was crossing the weedy lot beyond the jail yard. Many feet made a dry rustling like rattlers in dead leaves. The excited, quavering yell of one high-pitched voice shattered the undertone buzz for a brief moment. Nesbitt was staring at Frey. The deputy read the coated glaze of hatred. That and something else. The thick mouth was tight-pinchd in the corners.

Nesbitt was scared.

"You double-crossed us!" Nesbitt gritted. "You've got him and you've hid him. They'll tear this place to pieces till they find him."

"No, you double-crossed *me*," Frey spoke slowly. "You were just coming to look. Then you were going back to tell them. But you had that crowd come on anyhow. You could have held them back, Nesbitt."

Jeb Hickman spoke up, motioning nervously. "I say we call 'em off, Nesbitt. Maybe Gonzales is not here, like Frey says."

Nesbitt spoke in slow, measured words. "They're going to burn 'er down!"

The deputy heard that with numb realization. It was what he might have expected. Then all his efforts would have been for nothing. He could see, in his mind, the crazed men outside setting it off, the flames biting into the dry timber, the smoke and crackle and jeering watchers, and Gonzales forced to come out of hiding for a futile last run into the night. Then the hanging. Nesbitt seemed to be reading his thoughts.

With decisive movements, Nesbitt stalked to the barred window. His voice roared out into the gloom.

"He's hid in here somewhere! Burn the damn place down!"

He turned back, eyes burning maliciously. "We're going to teach you a lesson, Frey." He jerked his head to the others. "Come on. Let's go."

Outside the window, Frey could see the bobbling reflection of lighted torches. Raspy, commanding words shot back and forth. The palm of his bony hand went moist. But it worked like an automatic thing, almost without his having to think or direct it.

The old black Colt scraped from his holster. Four sets of eyes jerked down to galvanize on the muzzle hole.

"You're not going anywhere. If this jail burns, you burn with it."

Emil Bass was nearest. Frey saw the bunching muscles. Jerking the gun back quickly, he made Bass miss in his leap. He whipped at the head. Two quick slaps with the warm steel, and Bass staggered, throwing his hands to where blood welled in the face slashes.

"Come on out, Nesbitt!" somebody yelled.

"Anything else like that," Frey whispered, "and you'll get a bullet."

HE FELT a limpness he doubted he concealed. He could not kill these men. Nor those outside. He could not, in the showdown, pump bullets into people in deliberate slaughter. That was what he had known all along. That was the bad thing about it—why a mob always knew, somehow, that a lawman wouldn't mow down friends and strangers alike, to save one haggard, unimportant life.

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But his gun play, for the moment, had put them off balance. And now, something invisible came to side the deputy, and Frey was alert to notice it.

Mob noise. Like no other sound or earth. It must have burned agony into the soul of Gonzales there under the floor, but it also struck a strange fear into the faces of the men in the room. Frey saw it in them as they stared at his gun. He tasted the salty tension that came over the room.

"Keep your hands up. Keep close together. Hickman, you lead off."

Wooden-kneed, they bunched to the doorway. Frey circled. Nesbitt mumbled, "*We'll kill you!*" Hickman was silent. Bass walked dazedly, and Dorbandt was cursing.

"Into that cell."

They froze. He prodded Dorbandt in the back. They jostled in sullenly. He banged the door and locked it. Curiously, he saw the naked anxiety that took hold of them, as if they knew the stomach-pit sickness of finality that gets a man when he hears a cell door close on him. It was like the dull helplessness that had fastened itself on Gonzales.

Hickman's fists pulled at the bar. The shaky edge of panic sounded in his words. "What—what if they fire this place!"

"Maybe Nesbitt would talk, then," Frey said wearily. Outside, he heard his name hoarsely shouted, and other voices calling insistently for Nesbitt and Hickman.

Hickman begged. "Don't do this, Frey! My Lord, we might burn up in here if those fools—"

"It's your mob. Work on Nesbitt. There're three of you—why don't you make him say who killed Clint Absher! Ask him how he caught Gonzales . . . why he was going to pull that lynching before the law took a hand. Ask him about the trouble he had with Absher."

It was about all he could do, he thought—plant it with them.

In the office, he lifted the boards and called to Gonzales. The man twisted up through the opening, grimed and sweaty, breathing hard.

"Get back to the kitchen," Frey ordered. "Never mind if they see you." He nodded toward the cell. Gonzales looked fearfully at the dull glow of the torch lights, reflected at the window. Someone was yelling Frey's name just below.

Frey stood below the window. "All right—speak up."

"Where's Nesbitt?"

"They're locked up in here."

"Damn you—we're gonna fire this building!"

"You do and you'll burn Nesbitt and Hickman and Dorbandt and Bass."

He spoke loudly, knowing they heard him across the hall. Outside, now, they were crazy men. And that would help. Because, being crazy, they might believe. In their own fever, they might believe he actually would keep those four locked behind bars even if the building burned.

"He's got Nesbitt and all of 'em!" somebody yelled. The crowd noises flared briefly, then subdued. The talk and movement became a choppy mumbling of arguments.

"Tell them," Frey called at the window, "anybody tries to break either door gets a slug. I'm facing both ways with a Winchester!"

He went into the hall. In the half-light of the cell, he could see Dorbandt and Hickman standing over Nesbitt, talking roughly.

He went back to the kitchen. What was it, he wondered, that made a man's brain melt in terror at the vision of being trapped in fire? But it was a natural thing—he couldn't say that he relished the prospects himself, and *he* wasn't behind that cell door. And then, as he entered the kitchen, it came to him that fire and desperation could unloosen a tongue where nothing else would.

He blew out the kitchen lamp and whispered to Gonzales.

UNEASY quiet had fallen outside when Frey took a chair in the hallway. He sat with Colt in hand. He moved his head back and forth, watching front and rear doors. In the cell, vicious words rumbled.

Suddenly, he whirled toward the rear and fired two blasting shots at the door. Lead from the .45 gonged against the steel. Frey jumped to his feet, kicking the chair aside.

"The fools—the bloody fools! They're firing the building!"

Hickman flung himself against the bars.

"Let us out of here—damn you! Let us out!"

Frey crouched. Then, unmistakably, the

(Please continue on page 111)

CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ



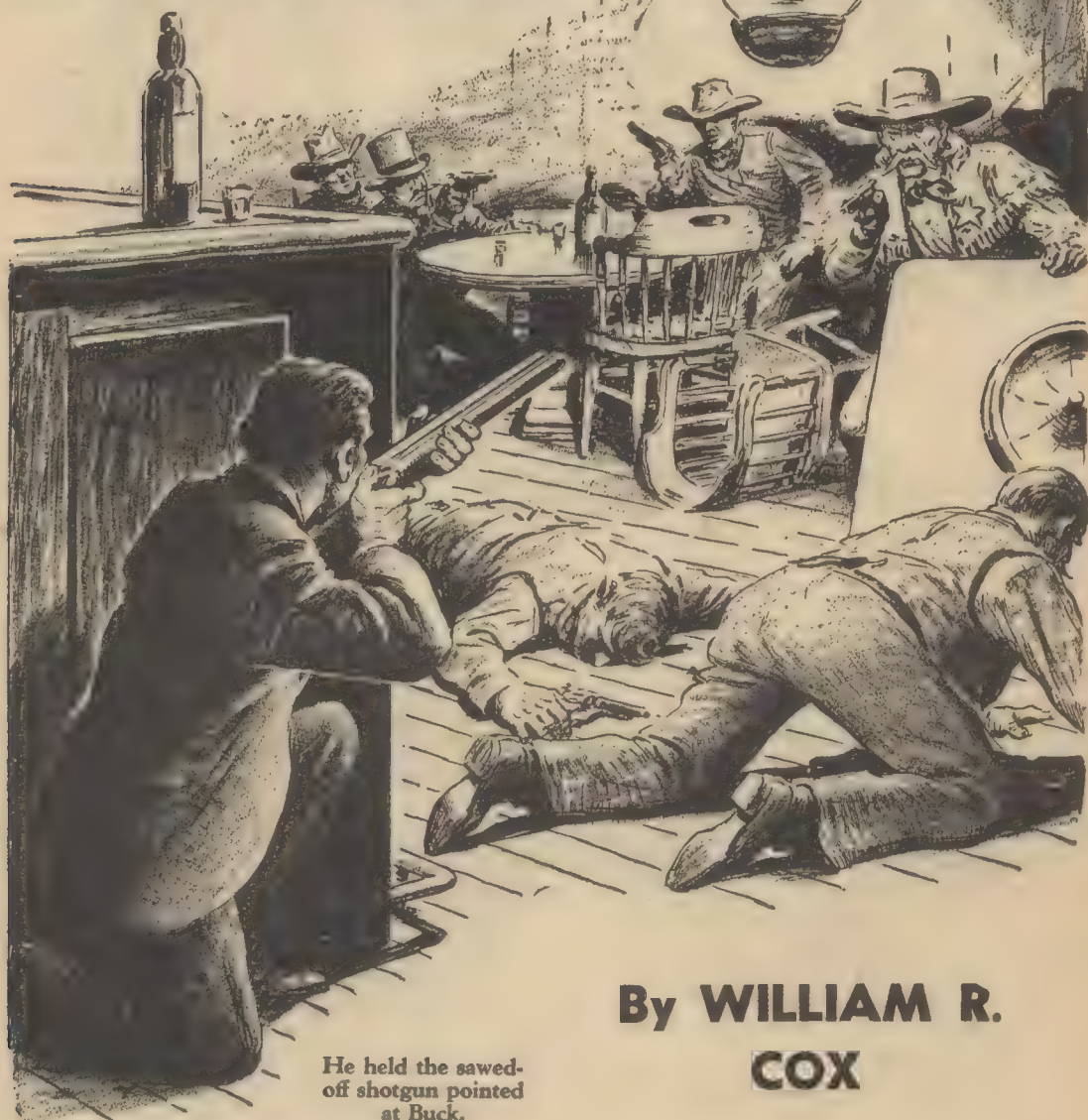
By **HALLACK McCORD**

(Answers on page 71)

HOWDY, cowpokes! When it comes to knowledge of the West, are you salty dog or green horn? Anyhow, here's your chance to test yourself and find out. Try answering the twenty Idaho brain twistèrs below. If you can name the deal on eighteen or more, you're definitely top-notch. Answer sixteen or seventeen and you're good. But call the turn on fewer than fifteen, and you fall in the class of the lents. Good luck!

1. True or false? "Doll babies" are pegs made of wood and which are used in braiding hair ropes.
2. If the ranch boss sent you out for the "dough boxer," which of the following should you return with? A large dog? A fat prize fighter? The camp cook?
3. True or false? According to the terminology of the Westerner, an "over-half-crop" is a type of earmark.
4. In the slangue of the Westerner, an "eyeballer" is which of the following? A horse that continually looks over its shoulder? An Indian? A person who meddles?
5. What is the meaning of the cowpoke expression, "fallen hide"?
6. True or false? In the old days, "feeders" were cattle which were driven to the corn belt for fattening.
7. True or false? In the old days, a Westerner characteristically carried his gun with its hammer resting on an empty chamber.
8. If the ranch boss sent you out to find a "flat-heeled peeler," which of the following would you return with? A cook wearing tennis shoes? A farmer who had turned cowpoke? A special camp cooking utensil?
9. What is the meaning of the cowpoke slang term, "flea-bag"?
10. True or false? A horse is said to be "flea bitten" if it is white with small brown flecks.
11. What is the meaning of the term, "to gaff"?
12. As applied to horses, what is the meaning of the term, "gentling"?
13. If an acquaintance of yours told you there was a "gun-tipper" in the area, how would you expect the latter person to shoot?
14. In the slangue of the cowpuncher, what are "gut hooks"?
15. If a cowpoke friend of yours told you he "heard the owl hoot last night," what would you think had happened to him?
16. Is the Western expression "He'll do to ride the river with" a compliment or an insult when applied to an individual?
17. What is an Idaho brain storm?
18. True or false? "Indian bread" is fatty matter obtained from part of the buffalo.
19. True or false? "Moonshining" refers to working on a roundup in very rough country where packs must be used instead of a chuck wagon.
20. True or false? When a cowpoke ropes with an extra small loop, he is said to be using a "Mother-Hubbard loop."

TOWN BUSTER



He held the sawed-off shotgun pointed at Buck.

By **WILLIAM R.
COX**

Not till the last of his brother's murderers was dead could old Buck Calvin find peace, but first he had to learn their brands.

THE town of Granite seemed to revel in secret knowledge that it was one of the last of its blatant, brawling kind. The newcomers brought in by the flurry of the unexpected gold rush rang the welkin until far into the dawn. The wide, dusty street, which bisected the community from east to west, was choked with wagons, riders and darting men, who rushed from saloon to

honkytonk in a welter of excitement and confusion.

The older settlers, who had founded Granite on cattle and farm produce, remained to the east of Washoe Road and waited with patience bred of deep understanding for what must inevitably occur.

And Buck Calvin hired out to maintain the deadline.

They paid him well, two hundred per month. On collecting his first stipend he smiled beneath the old-fashioned, sweeping mustaches, courteously thanked the City Clerk and marched, head high, to the Granite National Bank.

Buck Calvin still wore his hair longer than the current fashion, just as the drooping mustaches were heritage of another day. His sombrero was creamy white and wider of brim than any in town. His buckskin vest was fringed, his striped trousers tight and unwrinkled on the long legs, his boots were made by hand and stitched with a fanciful design, so high-heeled that his step was mincing, almost comical.

Around his waist was an ancient but strongly-made cartridge belt with beaten silver buckle, and in slick, worn leather holsters were two ridiculously long-barreled Colts. Buntline Specials, they were called, relics of the '70s, when Wyatt Earp had made such a weapon famous, when the trail towns were really uncurried.

John Abelson, somberly attired as befitted a banker in a booming town, gray-haired, keen-eyed, had kept abreast of progress, possibly a few steps ahead. But he grasped Buck Calvin's hand in a firm grip and drew him into the private office at the rear of the institution, away from the amused eyes of the pert young men who worked behind the caged counter.

Buck said, "Fifty'll do me a month. Take the rest, John, on the debt. I'm mighty proud to bring it in to you."

Abelson said, "It's too much. Pay off fifty and keep the rest. It's all anyone'd expect."

Buck smiled. His face was smooth and unlined by the years. His white hair was thick and luxurious, his gray eyes were alert and bright. "Got my name on a piece o' paper, ain't yuh? Gimme the money when I needed it, didn't yuh? Take a hundred an' fifty, John, and there'll be more so long as this boom lasts."

Abelson desisted, knowing his man. He

put the money in a drawer, writing a receipt. "It won't last long, Buck. I'm thinking about—later."

"Don't cross no bridges until I come to 'em, myself," said Buck cheerfully. He was looking past the banker, out through the glass half of the office door. He could see the entire bank, he could see the young couple entering arm in arm. For just a second his face was solemn, wistful. The man was very handsome, erect, assured. The girl was younger and as lovely as a peach with the orchard bloom still upon it.

Buck said softly, "Looks like your Dolly is sweet on Alec Stowe, don't it, Jim?"

The banker swung around to look. "He's been sparkin' at her, all right. I mean 'at' her. Dolly don't hold with much foolishness. 'Minds me more of her ma all the time."

Buck said, "He's a good man, up and comin'."

The banker turned back. He spoke swiftly, almost angrily. "He got you in a corner and practically stole Cross Bar from you. Maybe it was good business—it was. I know business. But it didn't make him out a good man, not to me."

Buck said, "Sho, John. I made the deal."

"Because you needed the money to pay off a note that your brother had signed. Because you had to back Steve no matter what. You lost Cross Bar, lost everything because of Steve. And now what?"

Buck Calvin's voice was cool and steady. "Now Steve's dead. And I'm alive. And I still ain't paid it all back. And I don't want nobody 'ceptin' you and me to hear about it, neither."

"You take this job," Abelson stormed on. "You buckle on the guns again. You're marked in Granite, below the deadline. Buck Calvin—one of the great ones. There's tin-horns down there would kill you just to be able to say they'd downed the last of the great ones."

Buck laughed. "There's hombres down there who behave themselves because ol' Buck's watchin' 'em, too. Nemmine that—"

Abelson interrupted heatedly. "You're not up to it. Not if a real bad one comes to town. You know you're not as fast as you were before Steve was killed."

Buck said gently, "Before Steve was murdered and I took to histin' a few too many, you mean. Sure, John. That's right."

He stood up in his conspicuous, old-fashioned clothing, smiling down at the banker. "Never did find out who gunned Steve, remember? It's ha'nted me, for sure. I know I been drinkin' a heap too much, but seems like it helps me study out 'bout Steve gettin' shot in daylight, right in town, over nothin'. But so far's these jacklegs in Granite is concerned—they won't down me, John."

"A good one might wander in," Abelson insisted. "I could give you a job. We need a guard here, in the bank. I'm expectin' to be held up any time."

Buck raised his thick brows. "Me? Guardin' a buildin'? Standin' around for the clerks and their women to laugh?" He shook his head. "You been a real good friend, John. Thanks a-plenty. I'll be seein' yuh." He turned and strode out into the counting room, pausing to speak to the young pair, bowing with hat in hand to Dolly Abelson, then going on out into the street, mincing along in his peculiar, plainsman's stride.

JOHN ABELSON sat frowning, staring after the figure of his old friend, remembering Dodge, and Abilene and worst of all, Hays City. Buck Calvin had been younger then, and Abelson had been a struggling merchant on the move with rail's end.

Earp, Masterson, Luke Short, even the mysteriously evil-good Doc Holliday had been proud to know Buck Calvin, had been proud to be associated with him. None had been faster, few as brave. All had acknowledged him one of the greatest gun-handlers who ever lived, a good man when the going was rough and the cause just. To John Abelson, a man of peace often in danger of being robbed or killed, Buck Calvin had been one of the gods who protected him.

Steve, too, Steve had been one of them. But Steve was different. Steve had an eye for the gals, for a fine horse, a quick dollar to be spent as suddenly as acquired. And when Buck had finally made his killing and bought Cross Bar, near Granite, it had been Steve who promoted wildcat schemes—and involved Buck in the madcat of them. And always Buck had believed in his brother, refused all other advice, staunchly backed Steve's suicidal plans.

So finally Buck had been ruined—and Steve had caught a bullet in his back even

as the town had boomed with the discovery of gold on one of the slopes Steve had prospected without success.

Dolly and Alec Stowe were coming toward him. Abelson shook his head, trying to rid himself of his depression. Dolly was smiling, but with a certain reserve, her father thought. Alec was assertive and good-looking and confident. They came into the office and Dolly kissed her father with genuine affection.

Alec said, "Mr. Abelson, I see Buck Calvin was in here. You know, somethin' ought to be done about him."

Abelson said, "Such as what?"

Unwarned by the cold note in the older man's voice, Alec said, "He's a laughing-stock. Him and those old guns and the way he dresses. Shagging drunks around, actin' like Granite was a trail town. Swaggerin' up and down the street below the deadline, drinkin' whiskey—"

"You don't think he does his job?"

"Well . . . it's the way he does it. He's a big show-off, that's what he is. An old bluffer, with his tin star . . ."

Alec stopped as Abelson came suddenly to his feet, scraping back his chair.

Dolly said, "Please, father. Alec was raised back East. He doesn't understand."

Abelson's voice was low and surprisingly courteous. "I reckon Alec don't. I'm plumb afraid he never will . . . Now if you'll excuse me. I got work to do."

"Come, Alec." The girl took Stowe's arm.

At the door the rancher wheeled, his face flushed. "There's others, you know. Plenty of people. I was raised in civilized country—some of us mean to civilize this place. Buck Calvin and his crew—they're finished, their day is gone."

Abelson said steadily, "When they are gone—I go with them. Their day is my day—and it's not ended."

For a moment the young man and the old stared at one another. Then Dolly gently steered the rancher out of the office and out of the bank. Abelson sat down heavily.

Was it true, he wondered? Had the day of decent, brave men of action really gone? Were these sharp-trading young people ready to take over the land, as sooner or later they must?

He heard faint shots from the other side of the deadline, a loud, echoing whoop, then silence. *Not yet*, he thought. *Not quite yet*.

THE shots across the line to the west had been fired by a young cowboy named Lazurus, a Broken A hand. Buck Calvin, just having walked onto the scene, reached out and took the revolver from the drunken youth's hand. Lazurus tried to hit Buck with a swinging wild right fist. Buck turned him around with a twist of his wrist, panting a little at the effort, for the boy was strong. Someone yelled, "Bust the old galoot."

There was an audience of drifters, boomers, short-horns and the vicious crowd which hung out at Clancy's Cowboy Saloon. It was almost on this spot where Steve Calvin had been ambushed, and Buck lost patience.

He reversed the cowboy's own gun, laid the barrel alongside the head of the struggling drunk. Lazurus hit the dirt and lay still. The same voice cried, "A dirty shame! He was only havin' his Saturday fun."

Buck stood erect. He was well over six feet in his high heels. He surveyed the crowd, seeking the speaker. In his booming, authoritative voice he said, "His fun got crossed with my fun. My fun's keepin' this town peaceable. Any takers?"

The crowd began to melt at the edges. Clancy, an old settler who had too quickly adapted himself to the new, bad ways, gestured for his crew to come inside the big saloon. Buck stood over his victim, and if his smile was slightly fixed, the heavy mustache concealed the fact. He wore the smile as a badge, as he had worn it in the old days, and men quailed as they never had from the scowls of other gunfighters when they beheld Buck Calvin's gentle smile.

But now it was different to play the old role. John Abelson had been right—the years and the booze had taken its toll. Buck knew it when he bent to jerk the Broken A rider to his feet. Lazurus, half-stunned, was a load to lift. But Buck Calvin could never let down, never call for assistance. He turkey-walked his prisoner to the brick calaboose of which Granite was so proud and shoved him into a cell. Lazurus moaned, then complained, "Geez, Buck, you sober a man up too fast."

"I'll send you a beer and some black coffee. You got to quit shootin' off that pop-gun in town," said Buck. "It gives ideas to the real bad ones."

Lazurus said dully, "I know, Buck. Red-eye drives me plumb loco. And they is allus

some hombre eggin' you on to gun it up."

Buck said casually, "Like who?"

Lazurus shook his head numbly, passing a hand over his blurred eyes. "Thet Comstock from Bar H, he's a rip-snorter. I dunno, Buck. Guess I'm just a buzzard. I'll 'preciate the coffee and the beer."

Buck locked the door of the calaboose and returned to the street. He had his first drink in the Aces Bar and then decided he would check on Comstock. The foreman of the Bar H was an old-timer and a close friend of Alec Stowe, owner of the neighboring Cross Bar. Once Buck Calvin had been next door proprietor to Bar H and had never got along very well with Comstock, who managed the big ranch for eastern interests.

He found Comstock in the Cowboy Saloon. There were many ranch hands mixed with the harpies and miners and riff raff of Granite in the large gambling-hall-saloon-honkytonk. Clancy was prowling about, a heavy man with grizzled brows and predatory eyes. Comstock was at the bar, pretty drunk.

Buck had a drink. Several men spoke to him; most pointedly ignored him. There were a few snickers aimed his way behind his back and he was aware of them but did not allow himself to show this. He stood beside Comstock and said quietly, "Don't turn loose your wolf tonight. You already got one good boy in trouble."

"Any man can't look out for hisself ain't worth pizenin'," retorted Comstock. He was a lean, bitter, leathery man with snapping black eyes. "I'll look out for me."

Buck said, "I'll see to it you do." He finished his drink and went back to the street. It was his habit to patrol, his star shining on his vest, his guns swinging at his flanks, going up and down and in and out of the saloons.

It grew wearisome after an hour or so, but he stubbornly kept at it until ten o'clock. The tempo was swift this night and the noise overpowering. He came upon two Bar H hands having fun at the expense of a Mexican youth. They were making him dance, threatening him with their guns, but not shooting them off. This was on the board walk near Clancy's, about where Buck had encountered Lazurus.

He walked in between the two roisterers and the Mexican stopped dancing. One of the cowboys struck the back of his hand

across the Mexican boy's face, cursing him.

Buck carefully kept the two men in view as he came out with the long-barreled Buntline. Without a word he whipped the heavy barrel of the gun across the temple of the first. The second he held with one hand, turning the muzzle of the drawn revolver away from him, then the Buntline swept again and a second man was down.

Buck said loudly enough, "All right, Manuel. You help me drag 'em to the jail."

But Manuel was gone. He had evaporated into the night, in fear of reprisal. Buck struggled, got the two men manacled and rushed them to the jail. He put them in separate cells and Lazurus stared dully at them, then at Buck.

But as Buck was leaving, Lazurus came close to the bars and motioned him close. "Buck, you allus been decent t' me. Them are Bar H men . . . Pokey and Jake. This here don't make sense—or mebbe it does. Comstock's aimin' somethin' atcha, Buck."

Buck said, "Did you know my brother Steve, Lazurus?"

The cowpoke said, "No. But I heard."

"You hear anything that might . . ." Buck stopped. "Naw. You wouldn't."

Lazurus swallowed hard. He said, "I only heard—they was after him for reasons. To do with minin'."

Buck was silent for a moment. It would not do to let this cowboy know that for the first time he was hearing a reason why Steve had been shot down. There had appeared to be no reason, unless some jealous male had observed Steve with a woman belonging to the murderer. Buck had known of no such woman—not since Steve had begun to pay attention to Dolly Abelson. Steve had always behaved after he had hung his hat on the floor of Abelson's fine home a couple of times. Not that Dolly had ever encouraged the younger Calvin very much—but that was the way Steve had felt.

Buck said, "Yeah. Minin'. Steve was allus foolin' around. But he never struck nothin'."

"I don't understand it neither, Buck," said Lazurus. "But you better watch yourself."

Buck fiddled with his keys. Suddenly he selected one, unlocked the door of the cell in which he had put Lazurus. The amazed cowboy stood, staring. Buck said, "Here—I got me an extra badge. Stick it inside your shirt. You are now a deppity for tonight."

Lazurus said, "Now wait, Buck, I ain't no sensible feller to make a good officer."

"But you ain't honin' to gun me—from behind," said Buck.

Lazurus said, "No. I ain't, for a fact."

"Then you are deppity for tonight," said Buck. He gave Lazurus back his gun and went out into the street with the man. He said, "Don't do nothin' or tell anybody nothin'. Jest sorta keep an eye out."

Lazurus said doubtfully, "I ain't no gun-slinger, Buck. But I don't aim to see a dozen down one man, neither, if that's what it comes to. And—about Steve, mebbe I can learn somethin'. I'll check around."

THEY parted. It was ten-thirty and Buck walked rapidly to the deadline and across it to the east. He turned down a side street and paused before the two-storied white house which John Abelson had proudly built for himself and his daughter.

He paused there, beneath a eucalyptus tree. Insects droned in the darkness and a slight breeze stirred. Buck came here every night about the same time, but sometimes he did not make his presence known. It was all according. If he was slightly drunk he merely stood awhile, satisfied to be near the people who knew and understood him, then returned to the saloons. Always he waited to see if John Abelson were around—or if Dolly might be alone on the wide verandah.

Tonight she was there, and she came down, shawl-wrapped, to the shadow of the tree, hurrying. She said, "Buck? I've been looking for you."

"Thought yuh had a date with Alec," said Buck. He smiled down at the small, pretty young woman.

"He left, very abruptly. He—we quarreled."

"Sho, now, that ain't sensible. Alec's a comin' man hereabouts. Be rich some day."

She said passionately, "He spoke slightly of Steve. He—he said Steve got what was coming to him."

Buck said softly, "He was prob'ly jest oratin', mad-like."

Dolly hesitated, then said sharply, "I didn't take it that way, Buck. I took it that Alec knew something. About Steve's death."

Buck said, "I misdoubt thet, Dolly." He thought of Lazurus and the matter of mining interests. He asked slowly, "You hear

anything about Alec havin' any minin' property?"

"He bragged about it tonight. He said he would bring in a bonanza that would make the ranch look like chicken feed. I didn't like the way he talked, I tell you. Nor the way he spoke of you, so vindictively."

Buck said, "Now don't you fret your head, Dolly. Him and a lot of others think I'm a four-flushin' old windbag. And mebbe I am."

"You should never have taken that job," she said passionately. "You—the greatest of the old-timers—walking among the craven little people grubbing for profit in Granite!"

"Now, now, it's a livin'," said Buck gently.

"Someone will shoot you in the back. I tell you I did not like the way Alec talked tonight. You must quit, Buck. You can't let them do what they did to Steve."

Buck said absently, "Don't fret, Dolly. You're a good friend. You and John—my best pals. Don't worry about me. I'll be thar—or thereabouts."

He patted her shoulder. To his vast discomfort she leaned against him and wept quietly for a moment. Then she straightened and said, "Of course you won't listen. I knew you wouldn't. You're like Steve when all is said and done."

Buck said, "You and Steve—it was like that, huh?"

"We were going to marry when his mine came in," she said. "It was a secret, but we were going to do it. Only he insisted on having money and repaying you. He thought he had everything. And then—he was killed."

Buck stiffened, his hands on Dolly's shoulders. He said, "I'll be goin' back to my rounds, Dolly. Thanks a heap."

"Be careful," she urged. "Watch behind you."

"I'll be real careful," he promised. He walked back to the wide main street, his head bowed in thought. He saw Lazarus almost at once and waved. Lazarus made a signal and Buck turned down a side street.

The cowboy said excitedly, "There was a Mex kid lookin' for yuh. He had an old, grandpappy Mex with him. Somethin' about a mine."

Again the thing rang in Buck's head. Steve had been secretive toward the end. But Buck

had never pried into his brother's business and Steve's many wild schemes had never seemed important.

Lazarus went on, "Comstock's oilin' up and Alec Stowe was talkin' with him over a bottle in Clancy's back room. I couldn't get close to 'em, but somethin' cookin' agin yuh, Buck. I kin feel it. Comstock didn't edge me on jest fer fun, neither, now I think of it with a clear head."

Buck said, "I'll see the Mex."

It was the kid he had freed from the cowboys. He found him outside a small adobe shack and went inside. It was dark, but the old Mex's eyes gleamed a little. The boy was his son and the Mex was a sheepherder and he had been in the hills recently. He told Buck that he had known Steve, had known of a claim Steve had staked. He said there was activity there now, and Stowe was in on it, because he had seen Stowe up there, with Comstock.

Buck thanked the old man and walked back uptown. He went to the county claims office and entered with a passkey. He was unaccustomed to files and papers; but he laboriously went through the claims filed prior to Steve's death.

Steve had filed several. He pored over them. He checked dates—and Steve's last claim was months before his death. There could have been another—and it could have been removed.

Buck blew out the lamp and left. He walked down the center of the street and broke up a couple of fights. He went to a small unpainted house and saw a light and entered. Brad Jones, the clerk, was reading by a lamp. Buck asked him about Steve's claims and when they were filed.

Jones said, "There sure was one just a week before Steve got killed. Up in the hills. I remember filing it."

Buck nodded. "It's gone."

Jones grew very excited, but Buck had lost interest. If Steve had filed a claim and it was gone and Comstock and Stowe were about to bring in a bonanza after waiting a proper time to throw off inquiring interests, that was enough for him. It tied in with tonight's events. The guilty parties would imagine that Steve had confided in Buck and would attempt to get him out of the way before they announced their strike.

He said to Jones, "Better stay outa that lamplight. Get your gun and wait in the

dark. I got a hunch they'll want you and your memory outa the way, too."

Jones sputtered, "Stealing my records. I'll have the law on them!"

"I'm the law, ain't I?" Buck smiled softly. "You hole up. Lemme take care of the law."

HE TOUCHED his badge once, going back to the main drag of Granite. He had worn many, throughout the years. He had faced the quick guns, the men who fought for the sake of seeing who was fastest on the draw. This was different, he knew. This was a plotted thing, by different people. Comstock was a man he had never cottoned to. Alec Stowe—he was amazed and depressed about Alec. A hard businessman was one thing—he had never resented Stowe's shrewdness in forcing him into a corner on the ranch deal. But this business—this was bad.

Steve had died for no more than a vein of gold in the hills. Buck shook his head, sorrowing for his handsome young brother, the reckless, wild one. It wasn't right for Steve to die for such a miserly thing.

He walked straight for Clancy's Cowboy Saloon, knowing they would be awaiting him there, that this was their ground, where they could suborn witnesses galore. He was aware of the sentiment against his old-time methods of buffaloeing miscreants and lugging them to the jail. He knew many good citizens resented his flamboyance, his style of another day.

He pushed the bat-wing doors apart and entered the barroom. Comstock was leaning elbows on the mahogany with several of his riders nearby. The tinhorns and jacklegs were busily swindling the miners and other suckers. Clancy loomed, beetle-browed, scowling at Buck's entry. Lazarus was playing stud with a couple of other cowpokes.

There was a woman singing in the rear and the roulette wheel went around and around. Yet this was different from the old days, Buck thought, standing at the bar, reaching for his drink. There was a different spirit. The free boisterousness laden with ferocious danger was lacking. This was a more sinister atmosphere. Clancy and his aides were milking the miners dollar by dollar of their hard-earned dust. There was conniving afoot.

Comstock did not glance his way. There

was no sight of Alec Stowe. The cowboys drank in silence and the woman's voice was shrill and shaky. Buck drank and walked out.

He made his parade. It was close to midnight and some of the other places were pretty lively, but he was not forced to intervene. He stayed in the middle of the street, coming back toward Clancy's. He had to pass the spot where Steve was murdered. He could look into the alley whence the shots had come in the night. He wondered when and where they would come for him.

And then an idea began to work its way into his brain. He trudged to the northern end of the street, paused there. In his simple fashion he went over all that he had discovered that night, all that must have occurred before Steve was killed. He found himself thinking of other days, other habits of action.

He stood for several minutes, staring at the stars above Granite, remembering scenes, people, events. It was amazing how clear they came to him, the memories of people long dead and forgotten. He could almost feel the texture of their clothing, the warmth of their flesh—and their blood.

He was not a man of many ideas. But once a pattern unfolded, it all became beautifully clear and his course of action plainly laid out for him. He grinned beneath the flowing mustaches and his shoulders went back and he began walking, in his short, precise strides, toward Clancy's.

When the lights shone upon him he paused and gathered himself. He looked over the swinging doors, taking in every facet of the scene with practiced eye. He adjusted his gun belt and suddenly slammed open the doors and stepped within.

He paused on the threshold of the saloon. One man swung and stared at him, started to look away with a grimace, blinked and looked back. Another and another paused in whatever he was doing and gazed at the tall, unmoving figure in the outmoded clothing. There was muttering, a curse or two, a short laugh. Then there was a silence.

At the bar Comstock turned, his eyes reddened. His men moved cautiously away, leaving him alone, but flanking him with their hands near the gun butts. Clancy started forward, but checked himself, his mouth working strangely, one hand on the table holding the roulette wheel.

Buck's voice was drawling, quiet, yet penetrating. "Comstock!"

The hard-bitten foreman turned, facing Buck. "What's eatin' you, Marshal?"

"I hear you and Alec are bringin' in a strike," said Buck.

Comstock started, then muttered, "Nothin' to it. Whoever started a story like o' thet?"

Buck said, "I hear you're about to file claim on a spot in the hills. Right where Steve filed before he got his."

"Whatta you mean by thet?" demanded Comstock. "You got no call comin' in here and shootin' off your mouth!"

Buck said, "Somebody stole Steve's papers outa the clerk's office. I don't give a hoot about no mine. But I'm thinkin' anybody'd do a thing like that—he had somethin' to do with Steve's gettin' murdered."

Comstock gasped, "You accusin' me of killin' Steve? You think you kin make thet stick?"

"I'm jest askin'. If I thought you kilt Steve and could prove it, would I be askin'?" purred Buck.

"If you wanta make any charges," said Comstock, "I'll go peaceable to jail."

It was Alec Stowe who broke the spell which held them all. He came from the back room, where he had been listening. He said crisply, in his most bullying voice, "Don't heed him, Comstock. The old fool is crazy. Pay no attention to him."

The harsh voice restored the cowboys. They began moving outward, their color returning. A tinhorn crashed some chips on the floor. The mob began to form, all hostile to Buck. Comstock took a deep breath and scowled. "I'm all right, Alec. Nemmine about me."

Buck said, "You and Alec. Bosom pardners, huh? Workin' the claim Steve discovered. You mighta got away with it if he hadn't butted in jest now." He paused and then snapped, "Which of you downed Steve?"

Comstock broke away. His hand dipped for a gun. He mouthed an order to his men. Alec Stowe cursed and dropped behind the bar. Clancy kept a loaded greener there.

Buck waited until Comstock had his weapon free. Then he said, "I thought it was you!"

He seemed scarcely to move. Yet the ungainly, long-barreled Buntline came out of

the holster. It went off seemingly without volition upon the part of the tall, aging man. The gun roared very loudly, matching the spitting fire of Comstock's Colts. Comstock spun around and seemed to dive for safety, but Comstock was wearing a bullet in his middle and blood ran from his mouth.

THERE were a half dozen guns going at once. Buck Calvin stood straight, staring at them and all the cowards and jacklegs who had hated him for weeks were trying to get in a shot at him. Lead cut swatches from his loose-swinging vest. He turned the gun and shot one of the Bar-H men who seemed to be taking aim. The others he ignored.

Lazarus, pale-faced but thin-lipped with determination, came up from the card table. He held a gun in his hand and shouted, "I'm sidin' the Marshal. Who's with me?"

Someone shot at him and Lazarus, unflinching, fired back and nailed his man against the wall. He shouted, "Look out, Buck!"

Alec Stowe was on his knee, concealed by the end of the bar. He held the sawed-off shotgun pointed at Buck. His finger was on the trigger when Lazarus yelled.

Buck moved, then. He made a great, cat-like leap to the left. He gained the roulette table, seizing it in his left hand. He thrust it over and the wheel clanged and Clancy stumbled, trying to grab for gold coins and silver pieces as they spilled. The shotgun went off with a roar.

Buck danced, his Buntline belching. Once, twice he fired. Then he crouched and moved toward the brave Lazarus. He saw Alec Stowe, bleeding from wounds inflicted by Buck's gun, but still trying to get the shotgun up to let loose the second barrel.

There was a commotion at the door. John Abelson's voice cried, "I'm a-comin', Buck!"

John was no fighting man, Buck thought, jarred. He glanced toward the door, worried.

A cheap tinhorn cowering behind a chair lifted a short, ugly belly gun and fired. The bullet toppled Buck Calvin from behind the roulette table. Dolly Abelson screamed, "Father! Buck!"

Dolly shouldn't be there, Buck thought. Neither Dolly nor John belonged there. He was numbed—the bullet had hit some nerve in his chest and it was hard to bring up the heavy Colts. He managed to roll over.

He saw Alec Stowe, swaying, hard-hit, but grim. He saw the muzzle of the shotgun coming up, leveling on him. He dragged at the Buntline Special. He got his thumb over the hammer and used his left arm for leverage, bringing the weapon to bear. He heard a blinding explosion as he dropped the hammer on the cartridge and at that moment he thought of Steve and that he would surely see Steve very soon.

Then he was rolling loose on the floor, crawling over the lacerated body of Clancy. Dimly he was aware that the dazed saloon-keeper had scrambled for a loose gold-piece and in so doing had lumbered into the path of the gun-blast from the greener. Hauling himself forward with his left arm, he sought Alec Stowe.

He saw the young rancher at last. There was a large hole in the back of his head, where the bullet had mushroomed out. Dolly was still calling to him and John was babbling for order and Lazarus was threatening all and sundry. Buck kept crawling.

He came to where Comstock lay groaning out his life. He said, "Was it you?"

Comstock's eyes were glazing. He gasped, "Naw . . . it wasn't me . . . Didja get Alec?"

"He's got a third eye."

Comstock nodded. "Alec did it . . . I couldn't shoot a man from behind . . . the gold . . . Curse the gold!"

Buck said, "Yep. It's done in better men than you and me." He felt sorry for Comstock, dying like he was, with one in the belly. He had purposely put the bullet there, because men talked, usually, when they were dying from body hits, he had learned in the old days. But now he was sad at Comstock's pain. If it had been fitting and proper he would have let Comstock have one in the head to put him out of his misery, like a man would do for a horse.

Dolly and John Abelson were through the crowd and at his side, now. John said, "Are you all right, Buck?"

The tall man got a hold on the bar. He puled himself up. He rested there, saying, "Get a statement from Comstock. Alec gunned Steve. On account of a mine. I reckon the mine belongs to Dolly, rightly speakin'. Get his statement."

Dolly cried, "You're hit! You're all blood."

"Some varmint sure ventilated me," said

Buck calmly. He could remain erect only by holding onto the bar. He said to the gaping bartender. "Well—gimme a shot. It's on the boss. He won't mind!"

The barkeep glanced shudderingly at the mangled corpse of Clancy and produced a bottle with shaking hands. Lazarus had the tinhorn by the neck. There was a gash on the cringing man's head where Lazarus had pistol-whipped him into submission.

Lazarus sputtered, "This is the coyote gotcha, Buck. While you was lookin' to see John Abelson come in."

Buck sipped at his whiskey. He said broodingly, "So this is what got Buck Calvin?" He shivered with the premonition of extinction. The little man wore a waxed mustachio and had pale, watery eyes and hands like a woman. Buck said, "Sometimes I plumb wonder if it's worthwhile."

He smiled then, finishing his drink. His tall body sagged suddenly and John Abelson scarcely had time to support him. But Lazarus helped, and Dolly and then sheepishly a couple of cowhands brushed forward to straighten Buck upon the faro table. The doctor came rushing in, out of breath.

John Abelson stood back. His face was ashen, his whole being shaken to the core. His lips moved silently as the doctor probed.

Now it can be the end. Now we are all finished, he was thinking. Dolly stood close to him, unflinching, waiting. *If a yellow little gambler can get Buck Calvin, then it's an end to a way of life.*

The doctor worked very hard. Lazarus was taking down the last words of Comstock, but no one was paying other attention to the dying foreman of Bar H. Everyone stared at Buck Calvin's still, unprotesting form, waiting.

And then John Abelson knew suddenly that he was wrong. The way of living did not matter, this was always due for change. It was the people who mattered. And they all, even the jack-legs and the harpy women and the sodden drunks, they were all standing with bated breath, awaiting the word. Would this strong, unafraid man die or live?

And because they all now felt their own destinies to be tied to the destiny of the corporeal Buck Calvin, their lives would be a bit different, touched by greatness. This was what counted, John Abelson thought, even as he prayed for the survival of his old friend.

Answers to CATTLE COUNTRY QUIZ

(Questions on page 61)



1. True. Doll babies are wooden pegs used in braiding a hair rope.

2. If the ranch boss sent you out for the "dough boxer," you should return with the camp cook.

3. True. An "over-half-crop" is a type of earmark.

4. In the language of the Westerner, an "eyeballer" is a person who is inclined to meddle.

5. The cowpoke expression "fallen hide" refers to a cow or other animal which has died of natural causes.

6. True. "Feeders" were cattle driven to the corn belt for fattening.

7. True. The Westerner characteristically carried his gun with the hammer resting on an empty chamber.

8. If the ranch boss sent you out to find a "flat-heeled peeler," you should return with a farmer turned cowpoke.

9. "Flea-bag" is cowpoke slang for sleeping bag.

10. True. A horse is said to be flea-bitten if it is white with small brown flecks.

11. "To gaff" means to spur.

12. "Gentling" means to break and tame an unbroken horse.

13. You should expect the "gun-tipper" to shoot through the end of the holster of his gun without taking time to unholster it.

14. In the language of the cowpuncher, "gut hooks" are spurs.

15. If a cowpoke friend of yours told you he "heard the owl hoot last night," you should know that he had been out having a big time, possibly gotten drunk, etc.

16. The expression "He'll do to ride the river with" is a high compliment.

17. An "Idaho brain storm" is a "twister."

18. True. "Indian bread" is fatty matter obtained from part of the buffalo.

19. True. "Moonshining" refers to working on a roundup in very rough country where packs must be used.

20. False. A "Mother-Hubbard loop" is a very large loop.

Another beast sprang,
fangs bared with their
promise of slashing
death.



By **ART
KERCHEVAL**

A man can only take so much from another, and his gun can only hold six shells, but the day Nester Simon decided he'd taken too much, he heard . . .

THE SEVENTH SHOT

SIMON KESTER eased his lean-ribbed crowbait of a horse to a halt in Gordon Shears' snow-drifted ranchyard, stepped down from saddle and hitched up his ragged levis, trying not to look bleak and defeated. He still had the homesteader's furious disdain for the cattleman. "Stand hitched, Prince Charming," he said, in tight

twisted tone. "Maybe I won't be long. Chances are, I'll get run off, like a mangy hound."

Tramping through the deep snow, he reached the verandah of the big ranchhouse, wondering how he had ever been able to swallow his pride. Simon Kester begging for scraps! It was a laugh, or was it? He shook

his head, crowding out that thought. You just didn't have any pride left when your wife and kids hadn't eaten. When this same Gordon Shears used his unbeatable influence to stop your credit in town! To keep you from getting seed and supplies in the spring. He came to the door and banged on it.

Gordon Shears opened it presently—the same lumbering grizzly bear of a cattle baron who had given Simon the ultimatum a week before the winter's first storm. Simon knew only contempt for him, but he had to fight that down. He only said, "I have some business with you, Mr. Shears."

Shears looked as if he were about to explode—as if he were amazed at Simon's gall. But somehow he mustered control, and nodded.

"Well, come on in. Close the door, quick."

After Shears had indicated chairs in the large living room, and they had settled themselves, Shears leaned forward and helped himself to a cigar but offered none. "Go on," he said. "What's on your mind?"

"Work," Simon came to the point. "Cleaning out barns. Mending fence. Anything. Anything, for any price. Just so my family can eat."

Shears raised his thick brows at that, and Simon knew he had surprised the man, just as he had surprised himself. Then, painstakingly, the rancher lighted his cigar, and suddenly seemed to settle back into some norm.

"It's happened to all of us, at least one time in our lives," he mused. "That moment when we have to swallow our pride. Thank the Lord, it won't happen to me again."

Gripping the arms of the chair, Simon stared, then blinked. Shears' words held him breathless. There was a side of Gordon Shears, maybe, that no one knew. It hit Simon like thunder. Shears was blustering and domineering, and few there were who could call him friend, but was he human, too? Simon shifted uncomfortably. He looked about this lavish room in which Shears spent much of his days.

A pretty woman's picture smiled at him from the mantel. The citizens of the Gumboot country never mentioned her, so it must be someone of long ago. One of the secrets locked deep inside this strange man. Simon had a fleeting thought that a lot of things, good and bad, had been responsible for the present dark construction of Gordon Shears.

And no one might ever find out what they were.

"To be powerful blunt, Kester," Shears said now, examining his cigar thoughtfully, "you wasted your good time coming to me."

Simon half rose, then. "But, Mr. Shears, I—" he began, moistening his lips. He hesitated.

"I don't need my barns cleaned or my fences mended." Shears got to his feet, walked to a window, stared out. "I pay men twenty and found to do those chores."

Simon's lips curled, as he stretched to his feet now. He couldn't help it, this growing animosity. "I get it. I'm a sodbuster. Especially I'm a sodbuster who didn't jump once, when you popped your bullwhip. You wouldn't hire me now to keep yourself out of hell."

Shears wheeled on him, now, with eyes as cold as the weather Simon must face in getting back to his cabin. Simon was awed at this capacity for fury, wondering again about the mysterious cross-purpose that had helped fashion Gordon Shears, and shrugging because it all made little sense.

"You catch on fast, Kester," Shears said, with an effort toward brittle control. "Now, get out of my house, damn you, and take this last order with you. It won't be repeated again. When the big thaw comes, young man, make mighty sure you and your family are off the Gumboot!"

Simon got out of there, teeth set. He mounted Prince Charming and pointed for home. Hannah waited in the doorway, seeming at once to read his failure. He put his horse in the barn and clumped into the house.

HIS heavy tread rumbled their scantily furnished, one-room cabin as he paced incessantly, and, running a hand through his thick hair, he was wondering if this was hate in him. Hate for Gordon Shears. He was aware of Hannah's anxious eyes following him, and the two children, Davey and Pattie, stopped babbling over their impractical homemade toys to watch him puzzledly.

"If ever a man was all black," Simon said positively, "it's Gordon Shears." He bit his lip.

Laying aside her mending, Hannah came to him. "Simon, you mustn't say such things. We—we don't know Gordon Shears very

well." She clutched his arms, her weary black eyes searching into him, making him restless, uncomfortable.

But for once he flung off her insistent hands. "We know all we need to know," he declared. "Shears believes he's the overlord of this Gumboot country—and he's just about right at that. Greed and power form that unfortunate man's god."

"Simon, listen!" she began, with fear for him. "He's letting us stay the winter—"

"Simply because he realizes we can't leave over the snow-blocked trails, Hannah." He shook his head. "No, the way he showed himself last fall is answer enough for me."

This stilled her mouth for the moment, and he knew that she was remembering just as he was remembering. Gordon Shears, heavy-bodied and pompous, had showed his hand one fine Indian summer day, a few days before the first snowstorm.

Shears let it be known he was the law the length and breadth of the Gumboots, the only law. Be damned to whatever papers the Kesters could thrust at him to "prove" they had "the right" to homestead the land they had settled on. This was Shears' B Bench range, and it always would be. Simon's eyes clouded with angry bewilderment. Shears had given him twenty-four hours, then, to get himself and his family out of the country.

"I'm not bluffing, Kester," Shears had informed him. "I never bluff. What's mine is mine—and in this case what's 'yours' is mine. And don't preach to me about right and wrong, and justice, like they tell me you're inclined to do. I have my own ideas, and I haven't changed them all these years. Twenty-four hours it is, Kester."

Looking back on that day, Simon recalled, now, the startling thought he'd had about Shears' words. Shears was tough all right, but it was as if he was trying to convince himself more than Simon Kester just *how* tough he was. It had seemed to show in the blustery tone, Simon remembered. It was almost as if there was a side of Gordon Shears that no one knew. Of course, when he'd had time to think about it, Simon knew that encouraging this point of view was sheer folly. Shears' record spoke for itself. The man lived only for himself.

Hannah stepped back from him, alarm in her still-pretty young face, and he reckoned there must have been something terrible in his expression. There should have been, for

that was the way he felt at the moment.

"Simon! What are you going to do?"

The answer to that was simple, he told himself. Every time he looked into his wife's or his children's faces, the same silent, unmasked questions damned him. What are you going to do? What are you going to do? Even as he stood there, he listened to the crackling sounds in his tin box of a stove. They wouldn't crackle very long—because his wood supply was low.

"My duty is to my family," he said aloud, slowly and thoughtfully. "I've no other duty now." His lips tightened. "And Shears has got more than he'll ever use."

Her brows lifted. "Simon—you don't mean—"

He nodded. "If there's any other way, I'm willing to listen, but there isn't. We're slowly starving to death here, Hannah, while Shears has everything."

"Simon," her voice caught, "I know what you're up to. But it's wrong, wrong. We read the Bible every night, Simon, have you forgotten that? We've tried to live by its teachings, no matter what happens. Please, please—don't spoil what we—"

He tried to smile, then, and it served to cut short whatever she was going to say. He tried to smile, to reassure her, but he knew that was impossible. Something like this built up in a man, like a swelling sore. There came a time when you couldn't turn back from what you had to do.

"Honey," he was still smiling, and putting an arm around her, "I think you put up the good fight, too. You always have. But right now, for the first time since we've been married, each of us is using a different weapon to fight with. And in dealing with a Shears-dominated country, it'll take a strong weapon."

"I never thought this would happen to us, Simon." Desperately she fought back the tears. She was going back into her memories, he thought wryly, and she managed a smile, too. "I had a young girl's dreams once. I dreamed we'd have the good things of life, if we just waited and worked and planned. We'd have a home and crops. And horses and cows and chickens. Instead, we seem to have an empty cupboard, an empty woodbox and even the wolves come up close to the house, waiting for a chance to snatch away our children."

Pattie, the younger, was crying then. Cry-

ing and looking up at him, wanting him to produce the miracle. She was only four; she couldn't understand. "Daddy, Daddy," little Pattie was saying. "I want some tandy." A simple want—candy. Only a penny's worth. He had to tear his eyes away from her.

Davey—he was nearly eight—was trying to be brave. He didn't cry, but he trembled and wanted to badly, because Pattie was crying. And Davey was hungry, too. Hungry as a young horse. He had forgotten his hunger, however, in coming quickly to his sister, trying to comfort her.

THAT settled it. Setting his teeth, Simon went to the upper shelf and took down his .45. He checked it. He had six loads—and hoped he'd only need one. Ammunition was another scarce article.

"Simon, you're not going to kill him!"

He looked up in surprise then. "Why, no, Hannah," he said. "So that's what you thought all along." He swallowed, then nodded. "Maybe I did give that impression. Maybe I have wanted to kill the man, but—"

"But," she cut in, "you know you couldn't go that far, isn't that it?"

"Maybe," he said, simply, bitterly. "Right now I don't have any real answers to a hundred thousand questions I've been asking myself all these months. Keep our babies happy as you can, Honey. I'm going out for a while. And—I'll come home with some meat."

There was a terrible finality, a paining, twisting steadiness in the way he said it, he realized. He stunned himself, more than Hannah. Hannah was stepping back again, this time, he knew, letting him go his way, for now. Hannah was praying, as she would keep on praying, until he returned.

He put on his threadbare mackinaw and got into his rundown boots. He pulled one of Hannah's stockings down over his ears, and rammed his ancient Stetson down on his head. It wasn't enough clothing, but it would have to do, till times got better. Till times got better! He had to smile. The smile gave way to a twisted look of scorn as, without a backward glance, he slammed out of the cabin he had tried to make into a "home," shutting the door quickly to keep what little heat there was left, in it. He felt of his belted gun, his expression freezing, as he slogged through foot-high snow, to his barn.

Prince Charming, for a seedy-looking

chunk of crowbait, was his horse-of-all-work. Simon thought, as he saddled him, that Prince Charming's days were numbered, too, if Simon Kester couldn't beg, borrow or steal another pile of hay for him soon. Mounting, Simon rode out of the yard, against the wind, toward Gordon Shears' B Bench spread.

It was cold, though a new storm didn't appear immediately in the offing. Wind sweeping over the old snow made the going bitter. Simon humped himself against it, and yanked his hat lower. This was the beautiful country he had come into with such hope, he thought. But that had been the Gumboot range in summer, when there had been green promise in the land, and he hadn't had his first inkling of trouble.

Well, it wasn't beautiful now. His mouth hardened. It was bleak and ugly—and vicious. The green had gone, and dirty white had taken its place, and a dirtier thing named Gordon Shears smeared up everything.

A wolf howled in the distance—then another. He remembered Hannah saying, "—and even the wolves come up close to the house, waiting for a chance to snatch away our children." Hannah and Davey and Pattie. In a way, he was the richest person in the whole world. He wasn't complaining, for himself. But he couldn't stand to see their healthy young bodies grow leaner and paler. . . .

One shot, he told himself, with an increasing tightness. That's all it should take. One shot, and a B Bench yearling would be dead. Shears wouldn't miss it. Shears had too many of the good things already, and he was not entitled to all of them. Some of them he owned illegally. God wouldn't blame Simon Kester for stealing one thin creature from out of so many, when Hannah and Davey and Pattie had eaten so little lately. Hannah would argue that point, of course: Hannah would say that was a crime and that he'd have to answer for it. Uneasiness needled him then, as he neared the B Bench. Hannah was so right about most things.

He crossed the frozen-over Pasear Creek, now, bringing himself out onto the B Bench range. Immediately the feeling spread through him that this act made him a criminal. He was going to steal from Gordon Shears. He remembered the feelings he'd had in Gordon Shears' home. The queer

feelings, then, that certain forces in the burly rancher's life had made him what he was. If he searched hard and long enough, Simon knew he could find excuses for almost anything. Maybe there was even an excuse for this Shears whom Simon Kester had sometimes found himself hating. But abruptly, savagely, he threw off the thought.

For he spotted the cattle, now, down in a windswept hollow. He kned Prince Charming downslope, his hand reaching for his gun. There were a half dozen yearlings down there, huddled in the snow against the freezing blasts that threatened their existence. Only a drop in the bucket to what Shears owned. And then Simon saw it—and a tenseness took hold of him.

Something else was menacing B Bench livestock.

Wolves! In a twinkling Simon spotted three of these curly loboes that every man in this Gumboot country had a grudge against. They were easing in on the cattle. Simon told himself he didn't give a damn about that, but he was primed at all times to kill every wolf he could.

He plunged Prince Charming sharply near them and he began shooting. He got a startled wolf in midwhirl.

Gun or man or horse, they didn't scare these wild things. These hunger-maddened animals were attacking anything that moved, Simon saw instantly. Another great beast sprang at man and horse now, fangs bared with their promise of slashing, horrible death. Simon fired—missed. In this moment the wolf's spring brought him within reach of Simon's throat.

A terrified Prince Charming veered just in time; the lobo was thrown off balance—just as his teeth had nicked off a piece of skin from Simon's neck. Simon twisted in saddle, hammering two shots into the gray elusive body to make sure it would never go for another throat.

The flashing shape of the final wolf was almost upon him now, and in that brief time before the impact, Simon squeezed the trigger, deliberately. He got the lobo between the eyes.

Still in his saddle, he felt a grim eagerness to pump his remaining shot into a B Bench yearling and be away with him and forget it all. Tonight there would be ample food in the Kester household. Nobody would be hungry. Hunger. It was a wolf, too, that

had to be fought away from the cabin's door and windows.

Then Simon shot. Shot, while he was thinking about Shears, and Hannah, and a lot of things. He sent his bullet ripping into a wolf that had already lain there dying. The animal stopped quivering, and Simon smiled, recklessly. The smile faded, however, as he quickly realized that it would have ended like this, anyway. He could not have gone through with it.

He was putting away his Colt, when Shears arrived. Big and lumbering. Gordon Shears, who didn't say a word as he shifted his bulk on his stout-bottomed claybank, but whose cold eyes were everywhere at once, taking in the startling picture. Then those eyes swung and fixed themselves on Simon, and it was as if they could say, "I heard all the racket and come a-running, Kester. Looks like you played hell around here for a while. Now I ain't no two-year-old, and I reckon I know what brought you to my range. But wasting that last shot on the old loafer—don't you think you're getting mighty extravagant for a clodhopper?"

But Shears didn't say it. Matter of fact—he didn't say anything at all. That was the funny part of it, Simon later realized. No, all the big man did was pull out his own gun, while Simon sat there hapless, mystified.

Shears looked at the dead wolves, and he looked at Simon, and he looked at one of his shivering yearlings. He didn't say a word, he just took careful aim. The B Bench critter went sprawling. Shears holstered his weapon, then, and he turned once more to face Simon, with eyes that weren't quite so cold now. But they were still unreadable. Simon could place any interpretation he wanted on them.

He watched Shears wheel away now, swinging his claybank uptrail and coaxing him out of sight over the hill. Shears, who was entitled to his secret emotions, if he did not choose to inflict them on anyone. But a Shears who certainly had them.

Riding up to the fallen yearling, Simon could foresee peaceful relations, maybe, between the Kesters and Gordon Shears. It would not be an easily won peace, but both sides were off to a good start. Simon had to smile, happily now, as he packed that beef home. Hannah and he would find ways to work out all of the troubles of their future days. . . .

★ HOGLEG HIJINKS ★

By HAROLD HELFER

An old ad for a Virginia City, Nevada, justice of the peace was recently unearthed. It offered marriages performed for \$1, divorces for \$1.50 and "all work guaranteed to be done satisfactorily in five minutes."

★ ★ ★

How to lash a cookstove on the back of a horse is one of the things students in horsemanship learn at Colorado A. & M. College. Officials claim their course in packing and outfitting is the only one of its kind in American colleges. To enter, a student must know how to ride and care for a horse.

★ ★ ★

The term "cowboys" first was used during the American Revolutionary War. It was applied to a band of Tories who stole cattle from both sides.

★ ★ ★

The white man's way of living apparently hasn't done the molars of the Indians in Wyoming any good. The State health department reports "a very high rate" of tooth decay among the young Indian children.

★ ★ ★

The constable of Childress, Texas, turned in his badge, deciding he didn't want to be a "two-buck constable" when the county commissioners cut the salary for that functionary from \$125 to \$2.

★ ★ ★

A West German newspaper recently reported that Communists have declared war on American cowboys and Indians. The newspaper *Telegraf* stated that the East German province of Saxony-Anhalt banned the exhibition of toy Indians and Wild West books. "These measures have been adopted to prevent the dangerous, indirect Americanization of youth," the newspaper said.

★ ★ ★

Buffalo Bill was buried in a tomb blasted from solid rock on Lookout Mountain near Denver.

★ ★ ★

Harry Capps, old-timer of Walsenburg, Colorado, broke an ankle at 18 when he

was thrown, and wore a cast until he was 24. Nevertheless, he went right on riding, tying his crutches to the saddle.

★ ★ ★

Research indicates that an Indian girl's love for a white man changed the habits of the Cheyenne Indian tribe more than 100 years ago. In 1836 Owl Woman, a daughter of the tribal chief, White Thunder, was married to William Bent, one of several brothers who had a fort on the Arkansas River in southeastern Colorado. At that time the Cheyenne lived chiefly in the Platte River valley. After the marriage, they made frequent visits to Bent's Fort, and finally about three-fourths of the Cheyennes moved to the Arkansas valley.

★ ★ ★

Deputy sheriffs and riled-up vigilantes have been on the trail of cattle rustlers around Lawton, Oklahoma. The Comanche County sheriff said the thieves were stealing as many as 100 head a day.

★ ★ ★

A back issue of *The Idaho World* (published in Idaho City) printed in the old gun-toting days of the West shows this ad written by Editor Jud Boyakin: "Stolen from this office—one revolver. Whoever returns it will be given its contents and no questions asked."

★ ★ ★

One of the legendary animals of the West, the "jackalope" of many an imaginative cowboy yarn, has been given official recognition. Tongue in cheek, the Douglas, Wyoming, Chamber of Commerce issues the following data:

"The jackalope is perhaps the rarest animal in North America. The strange little fellow defies classification. Were it not for its horns it might be a large rabbit. Were it not for its shape and coloring it might be a species of deer. It is not vicious usually, although coyotes have a fine respect for its sharp horns.

"The first white man to see this singular specimen was a trapper named Roy Ball in

(Please continue on page 113)

TALES of the

by LEE

QUEJO

(KILLER of the COLORADO)

QUEJO, THE COLDEST KILLER OF ALL THE NOTORIOUS HOMICIDE-ARTISTS OF THE OLD WEST, WAS PROBABLY THE ONLY ONE WHO KILLED FOR THE SHEER LOVE OF KILLING.

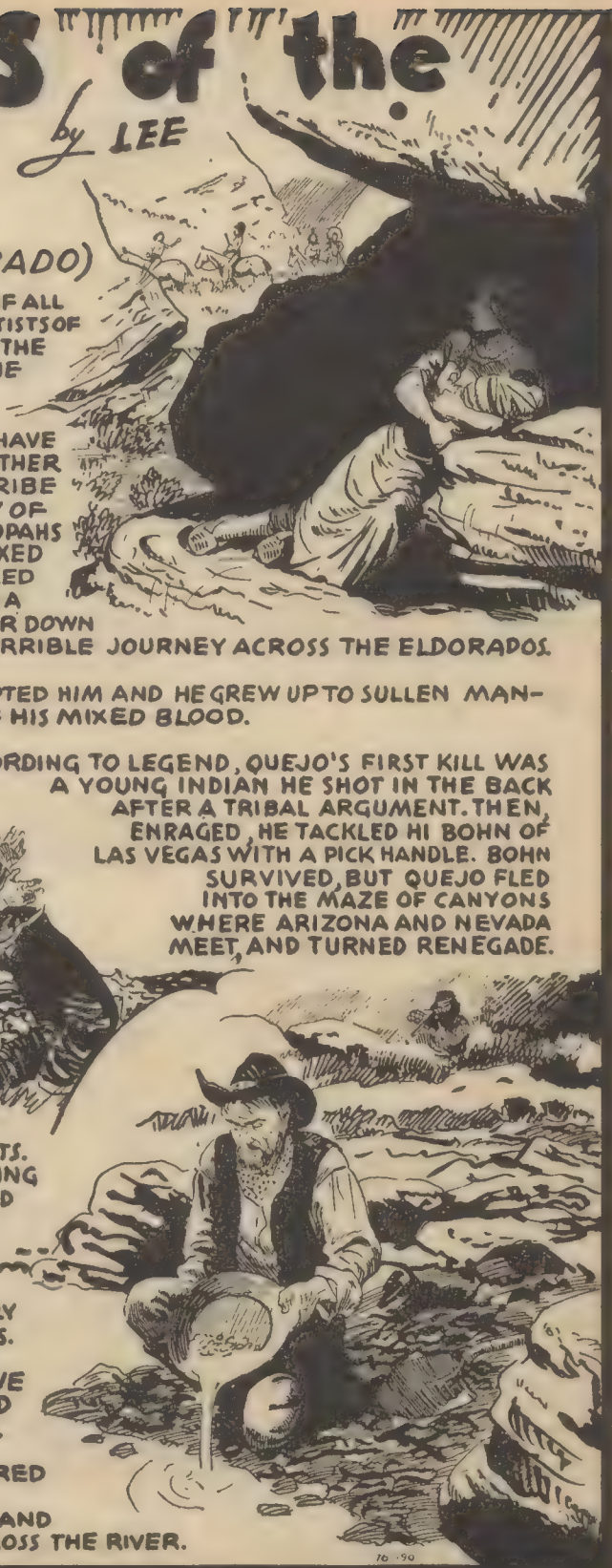
HIS FATHER WAS SUPPOSED TO HAVE BEEN A FRONTIERSMAN, HIS MOTHER A MAIDEN OF THE COCOPAH TRIBE LIVING IN THE CANYON COUNTRY OF THE COLORADO. WHEN THE COCOPAHS LEARNED HER BABY WAS OF MIXED BLOOD THEY WOULD HAVE KILLED IT. BUT SHE ESCAPED, ELUDED A WAR PARTY SENT TO TRACK HER DOWN AND SOMEHOW MADE THE TERRIBLE JOURNEY ACROSS THE ELDORADOS.

PAUTES FOUND THE BABY, ADOPTED HIM AND HE GREW UP TO SULLEN MANHOOD UNDER THE CURSE OF HIS MIXED BLOOD.

ACCORDING TO LEGEND, QUEJO'S FIRST KILL WAS A YOUNG INDIAN HE SHOT IN THE BACK AFTER A TRIBAL ARGUMENT. THEN, ENRAGED, HE TACKLED HI BOHN OF LAS VEGAS WITH A PICK HANDLE. BOHN SURVIVED, BUT QUEJO FLED INTO THE MAZE OF CANYONS WHERE ARIZONA AND NEVADA MEET, AND TURNED RENEGADE.

HE SET UP A CHAIN OF HIDEOUTS. WHEN HE NEEDED FOOD, CLOTHING OR AMMUNITION HE KILLED AND TOOK. SOMETIMES HE SIMPLY KILLED WITH A STAB OF THE KNIFE OR A .30-30 BULLET, ALWAYS FROM BEHIND. HIS VICTIMS WERE MOSTLY SOLITARY PROSPECTORS AND RANCHERS. FOOTPRINTS—THOUGH JUST WHAT MADE THEM DISTINCTIVE IS NOT RECORDED—MARKED THE KILLINGS AS HIS WORK.

IN A SINGLE WEEK HE MURDERED TWO PROSPECTORS NEAR ST. THOMAS AND FOUR MEN AND BOYS AT BLACK CANYON, ACROSS THE RIVER.



76-90

— OLD WEST

WHEN HE SHOT MRS. DOUGLAS, AN ELDORADO MINER'S WIFE WHO HAD CAUGHT HIM IN HER KITCHEN, A MANHUNT BEGAN SUCH AS THE SOUTHWEST HAD NEVER SEEN. INDIAN TRACKERS FOLLOWED HIS TRAIL TO HIDE-OUTS WHERE THE ASHES OF HIS CAMPFIRES WERE STILL WARM. BUT QUEJO SLIPPED AWAY LIKE A SHADOW. WITH THE SEARCH AT ITS HEIGHT, HE MURDERED A WHOLE FAMILY — FATHER, MOTHER AND TWO CHILDREN — AND STOLE AN IRON TOY AUTOMOBILE.

THE REIGN OF TERROR CONTINUED UNTIL HIS KILLINGS REACHED THE GRISLY TOTAL OF 23 — THEN SUDDENLY THEY STOPPED.

EARLY IN 1940, TWO PROSPECTORS, EXPLORING A CANYON, CAME UPON THE ENTRANCE TO A CAVE COMPLETELY WALLED UP WITH ROCKS. INSIDE LAY THE PARTIALLY MUMMIFIED REMAINS OF AN INDIAN, ARMS CROSSED ON HIS BREAST, BESIDE HIM A COCKED .30-30 RIFLE, A BOW AND ARROWS, CARTRIDGES, WAMPUM — A CHILD'S TOY AUTOMOBILE.



IT WAS QUEJO. BUT WHY, AT THE STILL ROBUST AGE OF 50, THE WILY KILLER WALLED HIMSELF UP AND DIED HAS NEVER BEEN ESTABLISHED.

GUN YOUR WAY OUT!



Burr accused him of thumbing a card, and pulled down on him.

Years back, old Otis Waggener had killed his best friend, Jube Lykkens, sure as if he'd put the bullet in him himself. And now, Jube's two big sons showed up suddenly at the Wagon Wheel spread; one of them packing a restless gun, the other a smouldering grudge.

MY NAME is Otis Waggener. Now, I'll say this. In my fifty years on this earth, there's one thing I've learned, if no other. Mankind has always loved the strong, and despised the cowardly. And on the frontier, if a man wasn't strong,

he plumb didn't stay around there long.

A leavening of law was working in the land, but mostly the individual was still his own arbiter in settling any dispute. The times made that necessary, and the man we respected was the man who wasn't looking

By KENNETH FOWLER

for trouble, but who handled it himself when he ran into it.

Now, about this Eddie Lykkens, and his older brother, Zeb, who turned up at Wagon Wheel, off the grub line. I'll admit it was a shock to me when I heard that name—Lykkens—from my foreman, Ike Pryor. It turned up a page of my past I wanted to forget. And when I went out to the bunk house to have a look at these boys, I saw a ghost. Zeb.

Zeb was a dead ringer for his old man. He looked so much like Jube Lykkens it sent a shiver up my back. Even though I knew Jube Lykkens was dead. And I ought to know, since I killed him.

Well, now, it's funny how things work out. You can go on, and think you've forgotten, but all the time there is that hidden accuser called Conscience, like a knife blade broken off inside you somewhere, that keeps the memory alive, and gives you no rest from it, ever. And here was the final irony—these two kids of Jube's riding the grubline, and now, of all the other places they might have found, showing up here at Wagon Wheel.

This time I'm telling about was right after the two big blizzard years—'86 and '87—which had run a lot of us beef growers clean out of business. After the big die, as we called it out here, top hands were scarce and I needed extra men. Crews had broken up and drifted south and conditions were uncertain. But I didn't know if I wanted to hire Jube Lykkens' boys. Conscience said, *It's little enough you could do*, but Fear added, *You do and maybe you'll be sorry for it*.

I put off deciding it that night, but the next morning, while Nancy and I were in the kitchen, eating breakfast, there was a knock on the back door, and Ike Pryor came in.

"About them two grubliners showed up here last night," Ike said. He stood just inside the doorway and absently massaged the two-day sprout of whiskers bristling his bony chin. "That younger 'un didn't strike me overly."

I had some coffee in my saucer and was blowing on it. Here was my out—if I wanted to take it. I tried not to show my relief, looking up at Ike.

"What's wrong with him?"

Ike frowned. "That's hard to say. Except that older brother of his acts like he was

dirt. And the younger kid just takes it."

I stared blankly out through the window, my thoughts far away, to the time when Jube Lykkens and I were running our little three-up outfit, down in the Sandy River country. And then Nancy's voice broke startlingly through my preoccupation.

"That's nonsense!" Nancy blurted. Her soft, lupine-blue eyes were suddenly stormy, staring at Ike. "You'd think a man had to be forty around here, to be any good!"

I saw Ike flush under his saddle-leather tan. Ike was forty-four.

I said, "Now, Nancy," and then, because I'm a ball of putty where my daughter is concerned, let it go at that. Nancy was eighteen, and pretty as her mother had been at that age, and it was true I didn't have a man in my crew under thirty. Forty, of course, was plain old.

For Ike's benefit, I pretended to deliberate. But now, with Nancy's heckling an added weight against my conscience, I had a sudden cold, helpless feeling that there was only one decision I could make.

"Well, bring 'em in here anyway," I told Ike finally. "A look won't mean we'll have to buy."

Ike shrugged and said, "You're the boss," and went out, looking huffy. Nancy smiled at me smugly.

"Thanks, Dad."

"You," I growled, pouring another cup of coffee, "are a spoiled brat."

"Pish! Why don't you try and scare somebody your size?"

NANCY went to the stove to get more bacon, and sunlight streaking through the window struck tints of flame from her mahogany-dark hair. I sighed, remembering the times I'd dandled her on my knee. Beth had been alive then, and those neatly coiled braids had been stiff little pigtailed, tied with swatches of perky blue ribbon.

I found my thoughts drifting back to the time when Jube Lykkens and I had staked out adjoining land claims in the Nebraska Territory, later joining them to start our little Bell and Hammer outfit. Eddie Lykkens and Nancy hadn't even come along then, and Zeb was just a scrawny little shaver in knee pants.

Then Big Rufe Hanock had come into the picture, and started buying up all the little

outfits he could lay his hands on. Hanock was out to control the whole Sandy River range, and by fair means when he could, foul when he couldn't, seemed well on the way to attainment of his goal until he came against Bell and Hammer.

Jube and I had put a lot of blood and sweat into our little spread, we were running a herd of three hundred head of good fat stuff on the best grass in the valley, and we wanted to keep our iron going. We told that to Rufe Hanock. And then the trouble started. It started fast, and it didn't let up.

We began to lose stock, have our fences cut. And two men, with just one hired hand, couldn't be everywhere at once. We'd rush to put out the fire in one place, and then it would start up somewhere else. Jube and I began to look like a pair of scarecrows. On the job, both of us, day and night. No sleep. Half the time so bushed out we couldn't even eat.

And about that time Sara, Jube's wife, began needling him to call it quits. Just the two of us, she told him, could never lick Hanock's big, gun-heavy outfit. He was not only bigger than we, she argued, he was smarter. For all our day-and-night vigil, we couldn't point a finger of proof at him. Which was true. And now, egged on by Sara, Jube began to talk quitting. He got curves in his shoulders and began to walk all hunched over. He looked beaten. I reckon we were both beaten, and didn't know it. I didn't, anyway.

Then, late one afternoon when I was hazing a little gathering of cows into a small boxed canyon holding pen up near the east fork of the Sandy, somebody shot at me from ambush and knocked me off my horse. I lay right where I had fallen until it was dark, then climbed back on my horse and headed down for my cabin.

There, Beth did what she could for me, then rode to town to fetch Doc Saulpaugh. The rifle bullet had scored a groove across the top of my scalp, and that was all. But in falling, I'd broken my leg, and Doc said I'd be laid up for at least a month.

Well, that did it. When Jube came over that night to see me, I was in a real sod-pawin' mood, and Jube's quitting talk was all I needed.

"Quit, hell!" I yelled at him. "The harder Rufe Hanock kicks us, the harder I'm going to kick back! It was Hanock tried to dry-

gulch me this afternoon up at the holding pen—Beth's finding that yellow scarf of his up there proves that. That's your color too, ain't it, Jube? Yellow!"

I raised up on my pillow and bellowed. "You know the only way we'll ever settle it with Hanock's Big H is to pitch it right back at Hanock—burn it to him the way he's been trying to do it to us. But you're too damned chicken-gutted to stick out your chin to a bullfrog! All right, wait till I'm back on my feet. I'll go looking for Hanock, and to hell with any help from a cold-footed yellow-belly like you!"

Jube turned white. "You wasn't flat on your back, Otis, I'd bust you right in the jaw for talkin' to me like that." His long bony arms hung slack at his sides, his hands slowly clenching and unclenching.

Then he turned, and I'll be damned if there weren't tears in his eyes. "All right, all right," he muttered, as if he was talking to himself. "I'll show you." And then without another word he walked out.

And that's how I killed my partner, Jube Lykkens—killed him as sure as if I'd planted a bullet in him my ownself. Because, that same night, Jube saddled up and rode into town and met up with Rufe Hanock in Pat Scanlon's Blue Chip Saloon and shot it out with him. And Jube wasn't fast enough with his draw.

Two days after that, hating me in her heart, Sara Lykkens packed up all her house gear and loaded it on a wagon and moved out. Legally, of course, she owned half of Bell and Hammer, but she never asked me for anything and I was never able to find where she'd gone.

Just a couple months later Rufe was killed in a drunken brawl, but by then I'd had enough of Bell and Hammer. I never wanted to hear the name or see the place again. So I sold out, and Beth and I came down here to the Indian Territory, and that's where Nancy was born, and where Beth died.

I WAS awakened abruptly from my wool-gathering by a sound of footsteps on the back stoop. Then the door opened and Ike came into the kitchen, followed by the Lykkens boys.

Ike is the best foreman I ever had, but a damned diehard. He said, "You said you wanted to see these boys, Boss, before they mosey on?"

"We'll see about the moseying," I snapped, "in a minute." My glance swung to Zeb; then to Eddie.

Zeb was almost a head shorter than his brother, but he had a hard, pounded-down look about him, hair black as an Indian's, and shoulders you almost could have swung an oxbow across. His eyes were deep and black, and had Jube's old habit of flicking restlessly around a room.

Eddie looked like a kid going on about nineteen, all spine and tossel, and not much lard on his bones. He was sandy-haired and lighter complected than Zeb, and he hung back from Zeb a little as they stood tracked just inside the kitchen doorway. I noticed this, and had the feeling that it was not a deliberate deference, but a result of long and deeply ingrained habit.

"Where," I asked, "did you boys work last?"

Zeb answered. "Cross C. They folded up, after the freeze."

I looked directly at Eddie as I put my next question. "How long were you there?" But again it was Zeb who answered.

Zeb said, "A year," and I noticed Eddie pin him with a sharp resentful look.

I weighed that, silent for a moment. Cross C had been a good outfit. Anybody who had worked there for as long as that had to be good. I glanced at Ike and he gave me a sour look.

"I admit we could use another man," Ike said pointedly. "But we don't rightly need two."

Zeb's eyes held a sullen challenge, meeting mine. "It's two or nothing," he said. "That's that."

I saw a glint of rebellion flash in Eddie's eyes. Then it died like a drenched spark under his brother's cold stare.

Too much big brothering, I thought. The kid's old enough to be his own man, but Zeb's worn a track for him. And each day it's getting harder for him to try and jump it.

It isn't often I overrule Ike, but Ike didn't know about Jube Lykkens, and besides that, there was something about this kid—something that would have made me want to help him anyway, if I could. Also, there was Nancy. She was pretty well cooped up here. I'd ought to see that she got to town more, where she could mix more with young folks and preen her feathers now and then.

"If we can use one man," I told Ike, "we

can use two. Show Zeb where he can stow his gear. I want to talk to Eddie a minute."

Ike didn't say a word. He just banged open the door and marched out. Zeb shuttled a puzzled, surly look between me and Eddie, then followed him.

I frowned down a smile that was beginning to curve knowingly on Nancy's pretty mouth. Then I looked at Eddie.

"Now, what is this trouble between you and Zeb, Eddie?" I asked him.

"Why, now, it ain't no trouble, Mr. Waggener." Eddie awkwardly began twisting the crumpled Stetson he held in both hands. "Zeb—well, Zeb likes to be the big auger, is all."

"Does, does he? Well, Zeb won't be any big auger in this outfit."

Eddie was silent.

"How'd you two happen to come to Wag-on Wheel?" I asked.

A flush burned through the dark tan on Eddie's face. "Zeb cal'lated we'd find jobs here."

"Felt pretty sure of it, did he?"

"Well—yes, sir."

"Hmph! Well, you're gonna work here, you'll take your orders from Ike and nobody else—that understood?"

"I reckon it is. Yes, sir."

"Good! Then you slope along now. Stand on your own two feet and to hell with Zeb."

Nancy waited until his footsteps had faded out in the yard, then swung around from the sink where she'd been stacking our breakfast dishes—with both ears cocked.

"Well!" she said. "About time you told Ike Pryor who's the boss around here."

I got up from the table and picked up my hat. I went to the door, then turned, looking back at her across my shoulder.

"Any further orders for me this morning—Boss?"

Nancy's eyes twinkled. "None I can think of right now. You just do your work, and we'd ought to get along fine."

"If you ever have any kids of your own," I shot back, "don't spare the rod the way I did."

Nancy's laughter, following me out into the yard, was a good sound to my ears.

THINGS ran along smooth enough the first couple of days, although Ike still clung stubbornly to his unfavorable opinion of Eddie Lykkens.

"He ain't gaited right," Ike told me, the third day after the Lykkens brothers had started working for us. I'd ridden up to Fork Tongue Mesa, where our boys were hazing a bunch of old cactus boomers out of the brush and down into a little boxed canyon holding pen. "Something," Ike said, "is wrong between him and that brother of his, and if I ain't misreadin' the sign, it'll head up into trouble before it's finished."

I snorted. "Hogwash! Zeb's just like any older brother. He's five, six years older than Eddie, and Eddie's still the kid brother who has to be coddled and protected."

Ike sat slouched in the saddle of his pinto, staring down dourly at the cigarette hooked between his stubby fingers.

"Mebbe you're right, Otis. I just happen to think the kid's got a streak of yellow up his back. I could be wrong, and I hope I am." He gave a funny look and added softly, "For a lot of reasons."

"Name one," I suggested flatly.

Ike took a last drag on the cigarette and snapped it away from him. "I got to be sloppin'," he evaded. He swung the pinto, then glanced back at me across his shoulder. "Nancy," he said, and giggled his horse before I could say another word.

With a cranky abruptness I swung my grulla and headed back towards the house. Nancy and Eddie Lykkens? Ike was loco! But suppose he wasn't? Suppose I was being blind as a bat to something going on right under my nose?

I weighed that and could find no ready answer to it. It wasn't often Ike misjudged a man. But hell, it wasn't often I did, either. Unless I was letting my conscience run away with my judgment.

I frowned down at the pommel of my saddle. One thing was sure—Zeb couldn't keep Eddie snubbed up forever, any more than I could Nancy. Even if I was fool enough to want to try, which I did not. Still, maybe if I talked with Nancy. . . .

But I didn't. I let it ride for a couple days. And then Eddie Lykkens broke into the picture again, although not in the way I'd been hoping for.

We had a mestino in our rough string called Black Devil, and the name fitted. I was coming out of the house this morning when I happened to glance up towards the corral. A rider was up on Black Devil—who, at this distance, I couldn't tell—but I

could tell he wasn't going to be there long, and he wasn't. I halted to watch, and was just in time to see Devil swap ends and stick her bill in the dirt. The rider went sailing.

He was limping away by the time I was half way to the corral, and then I recognized the lanky figure of Ike Pryor, closing the gate after him. He turned as I walked up, squinting at me through a feather of smoke from the cigarette pinched in a corner of his mouth.

"You look too damned pleased with yourself to suit me," I prodded him. "What goes on around here?"

"Nothin' for you to bust a gut over," Ike said. He gave me a deliberate steady look and spat the cigarette out of his mouth. "Zeb and Eddie happened to be here," he explained grudgingly, "lookin' over Black Devil. So I asked why didn't one of 'em try her. Zeb told Eddie to git up and give her a whirl and Eddie told him to go to hell. So—" Ike shrugged—"Zeb rode her."

"Damn it, Ike, what are you trying to prove to me? Eddie does his work around here, doesn't he?"

"Sure, sure, Otis, he does his work."

"Then why the hell don't you leave the kid alone? If I'd wanted a show rider here, I'd've hired a show rider."

"You never hired a quitter before, Otis."

"And I haven't now! I told Eddie to take his orders from you and nobody else. Let Zeb keep his hands off and the kid will do to take along."

Ike shrugged again. "You're the doctor, Otis."

"Then, damn it, you take your medicine," I grumbled, and walked away.

RINGGOLD was our nearest town. A spur of the railroad cut in there, and being a rail-head town, it was a shipping point, and on Saturday nights a mecca for all the outfits within a radius of thirty miles, including ours. Ringgold was a high-stepping town—saloons and gambling joints in the usual plentiful supply—and Ringgold was where this started, although I knew nothing of that on this particular morning. I'd just finished breakfast, and was heading up to the corral, to look at a sick colt Ike had told me about, when sounds of a scuffle drew my attention.

The sounds seemed to come from in back of the bunk house, but by the time I'd got-

ten there, the shindig was over. Eddie, his face like a raw hunk of beef where Zeb had worked it over, was picking himself up groggily from the ground, and Zeb stood a little away from him, a chunky bull of a man, with only a trickle of blood from his puffed out under lip to show a score for Eddie.

I stood tracked, half hoping Eddie might have enough left to whip around and land one more good wallop on that damaged lip. Instead, with all the fight apparently knocked plumb out of him, he stood glowering at Zeb, barely able to stand on his feet.

"All right," he panted out. "You got in your licks this time. But I'm warnin' you, Zeb. You keep your mouth shut about Mr. Waggener." There was a sudden wild, crazy light in Eddie's eyes. "You blab anything to Nancy and—and by Heaven I'll—"

"You won't do a damned thing," Zeb cut him off in a jeering voice. "Why, you chicken-livered little—"

He didn't finish it. With a last desperate surge of strength Eddie lunged at him, and I got suddenly sick in the belly as I saw Zeb disdainfully gather up a fistful of his shirt, then drop him with a savage, deliberate clout to the jaw. I walked up behind Zeb then, and stood tracked.

"Now why don't you kick him," I said. "You might as well do it up right."

Zeb lurched around. His eyes froze in a look of blank surprise when he saw me. But I'll give him credit. There was no fear in them.

"You stay out of this," he blurted thickly. "This is between Eddie and me." Then, before I could whip up my temper enough and smash him in the face, he spun around and started walking rapidly up towards the corral.

I started after him. Then I stopped, and time rolled back, and I remembered something my father had told me once. I was fifteen at the time, and we'd gone in to town together, and I'd gotten into a fight with an older kid named Marcus Welch. When my father had come out of Trandell's Store, Marcus and I were on the boardwalk, tearing into each other like a pair of wildcats. Marcus Welch was a head taller than I was, and a couple years older, and the outcome of the fight was never in doubt. But Father just stood there under the awning of the store and watched Marcus larrup the

daylights out of me. He never said a word.

But it was what he said afterward that I never forgot. "Otis," he told me, as we were driving home, "I could have stopped that fight and saved you a lot of pain. But I want you to remember this. You lost the fight, but you didn't lose anything else. You can close a cut, or set a broken bone. But you can't ever repair a human heart, or restore a man's spirit, if you let him quit. Some day you'll need that heart and that spirit. A man's only half a man who hasn't got both."

The echo of my father's words turned my thoughts back to Eddie. Zeb had likely pecked Eddie into that fight. But Eddie had fought. If he had wanted to duck it, he could have just walked away from Zeb. Or hadn't Zeb given him the chance? And, if Zeb had prodded Eddie into it, there must have been a reason. That hadn't been any sparring match. Those two had really been pouring on the coal.

A sound of voices rammed against my preoccupation, and swinging around, I was startled to see Nancy bent over Eddie, who, with a man's instinctive dislike of being helped by a woman, deliberately pushed away from her assisting arm as he came unsteadily to his feet.

"Leave me be," I heard him growl at her, as he made a show of standing firmly on his wobbly legs. "I'm all right."

"Oh, sure, you're fine," came Nancy's voice, and I noticed she sounded all choked up. "Look at your face! You—you look as if—"

At that moment Eddie looked up and saw me. "We'll talk about this later," he told Nancy abruptly. "I'm goin' in to the bunk house and wash up." With that, he swung around and started walking away, and then Nancy heard me coming up behind her and turned with a startled little cry.

"Dad!"

Something about the look in her eyes made me want to reach out and take her into my arms. Something else made me hold back. I seemed to be the only one around here who didn't know what was going on right on my home lot.

"Where'd you drop from?" I said grimly. "Out of a cloud?"

"No. I—I'd been up to the tool shed, to—to get a basket. When I came out—well, I saw Zeb and Eddie. They—they were—"

"Having a little brotherly argument," I suggested meagerly. "Which Zeb won?"

Nancy's mouth tightened. "Maybe Zeb thinks he won it. But he didn't!"

I guess that did it. Something about the look in her eyes, the tone of her voice. I could be wrong, but I decided to tack it down fast.

"You and Eddie, Nance. Is that it?"

For just an instant, she seemed to hesitate. Then she said, almost fiercely, "Eddie and I are going to get married, Dad."

Just like that. Otis Waggener's daughter didn't beat around bushes, either.

You can be prepared for a thing, yet still feel the shock of it when it hits you. I stared at her, speechless for a second. Then, before I could limber up my tongue, Nancy was pouring out the whole story. Eddie, it seemed, had ridden into town a few days before, and with two months' wages in his poke, had bought chips in a game at Duke Macklin's Silver Dollar, hoping to build the money into a stake for him and Nancy.

He'd hit a lucky streak and had run the sixty dollars up to five hundred. And then Duke's brother, Burr, who had been in the game, had accused him of thumb-nailing a card, and had pulled down on him. Burr had warned Eddie to get out of town and stay out, and Burr's Colt had won the decision.

Now Burr wanted Eddie out of the country altogether—and that was what they'd fought about.

Nancy finished, "That's about all of it, except Eddie wanted to go back later and have it out with Burr, and I wouldn't let him." Her mouth grew rigid. "Zeb and the rest of them can say what they like about Eddie, but I'm not letting him go out to be shot down by a cheap gutter killer like Burr Macklin!"

I WAS past the shock stage now, but there was still a feeling of wings flapping hollowly in the cave of my stomach. *Eddie wanted to go back.* Nancy had said that. And probably believed it. But now Eddie had the one safe, sure refuge for any coward. A petticoat.

"Burr," I agreed quietly, "does have a pretty bad rep. A man would need plenty sand in his craw to go against him."

Nancy wasn't much bigger than pan size, but she always seemed to get taller when

she had her dander up. Her blue eyes frosted, staring up at me.

"I know what you're thinking!" she blurted. "You're thinking Eddie's afraid of Burr Macklin. And it—it's not so!"

"I didn't say it was, Nance."

"Zeb's tried to run Eddie's life ever since Eddie was knee-high to a grasshopper," Nancy rushed on, as if she hadn't heard me. "Eddie's father was killed in some kind of a gun fracas, and his mother died when he was still hardly more than a boy. Zeb raised him, and he feels indebted for that, but he can't go on kow-towing to Zeb forever! Eddie do this, Eddie do that!"

Her voice shook. "What Zeb needs isn't a brother, but a dog! A dog that will come to heel every time he—he whistles!"

I stared at her tense, strained face and felt my belly loop up into an icy knot. My own belief in Eddie Lykkens was reluctantly dying. But what about Nancy? Should I let her hold the bright counterfeit dream to her breast a little longer?

In a father, emotion rules stronger than reason. I put out my arms and hugged her against me. "Forget Zeb," I growled. "Eddie's a lucky boy, and I'm a lucky father. Now, wipe that pout off your face. I'm agin' 'em, when they go with stick-up noses."

"Oh, Dad!" She clung to me like a little girl, and I took her arm, and we started walking slowly together, back towards the house. That's when I first noticed the faint dust cloud in the distance, going away in the direction of town, and with a faint uneasiness, wondered if that would be Zeb. Zeb, who, I was aware now, knew about Jube and me, and was using the knowledge as a kind of lever, on Eddie. The question was, did Zeb really blame me for what had happened then, as Sara Lykkens had done, or was he piling it on for Eddie's benefit, just so he could hold the kid in line?

I felt I had to have a talk with Eddie, and when Nancy and I got to the house, I told her to go in and brew up a pot of coffee and I'd be right back. But when I got back to the bunk house and poked my head in the door there was nobody there but Ike Pryor, just coming out.

I guess I had a kind of premonition then, and Ike confirmed it, when I asked him where Eddie was.

"Seen him headin' up for the corral, two,

three minutes ago," Ike said, with a shrug. "Looks like your boy is pullin' up stakes, Otis."

"Pulling up, hell!" I almost shouted at him. If Ike had intended to needle me, he sure succeeded, this time. "Why would Eddie be pulling up stakes?" I demanded.

"Because the boys all think he's a quitter. Same as I do," Ike stated flatly.

"Which makes you a grissel-heeled old fool!" I barked, and swung on my heel.

I really kicked up dust, then, heading for the corral. There I made a quick catch of my black mare saddler, and a couple minutes later I was kicking up thicker dust, burning the grit for Ringgold. I kept the mare flying for a couple miles, then slowed to let her cool her heels a little, and after a while, began to cool down a little myself.

If Ike was grissel-heeled, what in time was the right billing for a stubborn old diehard like I was? A man can hug to hope long after it's a dead and useless weight upon his mind, and riding along, it struck me I might be doing just that. How could I be sure Eddie had really tried to make a fight of it, with Zeb? And why did I persist in believing that his only reason for refusing to ride Black Devil was to put on a show of independence over Zeb? Also, there seemed to be no doubt that Eddie had backed down from Burr Macklin, at the Silver Dollar. But Burr, apparently, had been careful to pull before making his claim that Eddie had marked a card.

A strong cross-current pulled into my thoughts and brought back the memory of Jube. You put enough pressure on a man, and he'll do crazy things, sometimes, to prove he's no coward. And now there was still the lingering hope in me—and the fear—that the pressures on Eddie, from Zeb, and Ike, and all the rest of them, might be the prod that would spring him from his dependence on Zeb, and make a man of him. A man, or a corpse. . . .

The hope was in me, because I wanted to see Eddie join the tribe of the strong, instead of the weak. The fear was there because I had a brand on my conscience, and the dread that a tragic pattern might now be repeated. Back there at the bunk house, I'd heard Zeb tax Eddie as a coward. Then Zeb had saddled up and lit a shuck. Had he gone to Ringgold, to pull Eddie's chestnuts out of the fire with Burr Macklin? And now,

was Eddie himself Ringgold-bound, to try and stop Zeb? Or—I felt an icy prickle at the back of my neck—to bring his own answer to Burr Macklin's warning to him to stay out of town?

It was nearing five o'clock when I rode into Lavery's livery, in Ringgold, left my mare there, then started on downstreet, afoot, looking for Zeb and Eddie.

I had no exact awareness of it at first—a slow coming, half-realized feeling that the street was strangely quiet and empty for this time of the day. The boardwalks were deserted, and there was a kind of rhythm to the silence, almost like a clock ticking faintly in a dark and empty room.

Passing Charlie Lefferts' place I caught a low murmur of voices from behind the motionless batwings, and was conscious of eyes staring out at me over the spindled tops. And at that moment I saw the horse, tied at the hitch rack of the O.K. Saloon, a half block farther downstreet. A blood bay skewbald, standing hard-run and hipshot, at the edge of the boardwalk. Eddie Lykkens' horse.

HE WAS standing at the street end of the bar as I entered the O.K., his shoulders slumped a little, his gray eyes blank and morose, staring down at the half-filled glass of whiskey set out in front of him.

Drunk! I thought. He's getting roostered so he can walk out through that back door and forget this whole ugly mess.

I guess it was the shock of disappointment, the sudden bitter knowledge that Ike was right about him, and that I was wrong, that made me do what I did then. Eddie had picked up the whiskey glass, and had it half raised to his mouth, as I lunged forward abruptly and cuffed it out his hand.

It fell with a tinkling crash, and as it did, Eddie spun so quickly he almost knocked me down. And then I knew. No drunk could have moved with that pouncing alertness. Eddie Lykkens was neither drunk nor getting drunk. This was the lull before battle. And at a time like this one drink could steady a man down, it could be a profit in sureness, steadiness, over speed bought at the expense of stability.

Eddit looked at me calmly and said, "Howdy, Mr. Waggener." No rancor in his voice, no anger. At that moment I knew it

was not Eddie Lykkens' nerves that needed control, but mine. And now I thought of Nancy, and suddenly my belly felt as if a heavy steel lid had closed down on it.

I said, "I'm sorry I did that Eddie. I reckon I read the sign wrong."

Eddie nodded to Chubby Arns, the bartender, and Chubby set out another glass.

"That's all right, Mr. Waggener," Eddie said. He picked up a bottle from the bar and carefully poured the whiskey glass half full. "It really don't make no never-minds."

I said: "Women are funny critters, Eddie. They don't savvy that a man has to live with his conscience, too."

Eddie nodded. "I held back long as I could, Mr. Waggener. For Nancy's sake. But Zeb and Ike taken a notion I'm cold-footed. Zeb said if I was too yellow to take care of Burr Macklin, he'd do it his ownself. That's what started the fight, back at the bunk house."

"I don't guess there's any real spite in Zeb, Eddie."

"No sir," Eddie said, "there ain't." He hesitated briefly, then took advantage of the opening I'd given him. "Zeb—Zeb told me that story about you and my dad, Mr. Waggener. But he don't really hold anything against you. It's just he can't savvy, I'm old enough now to—"

"I understand, Eddie." I notched my boot in the brass rail and leaned back heavily against the bar, conscious of a sharp depressed feeling as I realized how suddenly, sometimes, life can kick a kid into a situation which only age and experience should be made to face. "Do you know where Zeb is, Eddie?" I asked softly.

"No sir, I don't." A note of worry tinged Eddie's voice, now. "If he's in town, I ain't been able to find him. But the word's out I'm here. Burr's waitin' out at Petey the Barber's, downstreet a piece."

"Burr will try and build it up on you, Eddie," I said. "He likes to make a man rush it. You take it slow and don't show any hurry, you might buffalo him."

Eddie nodded absently. "I taken a notion of that, Mr. Waggener." He swallowed his drink, then swung around, hitching up his gun belt. His gray eyes became remote and vacant, staring past me. "Well, I'll mosey along now," he said.

I signaled to Chubby and he skidded a glass across the bar to me. I poured a drink

and held it. There had been a bunch of men huddled together at the far end of the bar, but now the party broke up and everybody, Chubby Arns included, started moving forwards towards the saloon's two front windows. I took a position next to the door side of the nearest window and saw Eddie out on the boardwalk, looking up and down the still empty street.

Another minute, and he'd be on gunman's sidewalk. I resisted a crazy impulse to rush out and grab him by the seat of his pants and drag him back in here. And in that moment I knew how my father must have felt that day he stood under the awning of Trandell's Store and watched me bat it out with Marcus Welch. I thought of his words to me, afterward. *You can't ever repair a human heart, or restore a man's spirit, if you let him quit.*

I felt my fingers press so hard around the glass of whiskey in my hand I thought it would break. And at that instant the doors of a saloon across the street swung open and Zeb Lykkens stepped out into the shelter of its tiny outside lobby. Zeb stood sideways to the boardwalk, his head bent over the gun opened in his hand while he checked its load. And then I heard Eddie's voice, like a snapped whip, beating across the street at him.

"Zeb, you put up that gun or I'll blow it right out of your fist!"

Zeb's head jerked around. His eyes showed a blank shock momentarily. Then jeering anger spurted into his voice.

"What with," Zeb taunted, "hot air? You keep out of my way, Squirt!"

I felt my belly coil into a tight steel spring as I watched Eddie's hand dip, arc up. Then the shot roared and the spring let go, whirling inside me like a spun wheel. The gun flew from Zeb Lykkens' hand and I saw him stagger back, blood dripping from his fingers.

I guess I remember the rest of it more as a kind of blurred nightmare than as anything actual or believable. Hands reaching out from the saloon doorway over there and hauling Zeb inside. Eddie, turning, and pacing slowly, deliberately, downstreet, as the door to Petey's Barbershop came open and Burr Macklin stepped out. Burr, dressed to the nines, Burr with his hand up to his pink jowls, savoring the cool afterglow of a good shave. Burr standing

tracked for a moment in a gesture of calculated indifference, before moving down to the boardwalk.

You had to hand it to Burr. He really built it up.

But look upstreet, Burr. Look at the kid. No shave, no hair cut, just a slug of whiskey in his belly. He'll be a hair slower than you'll be, Burr, but maybe a hair surer, too.

And Eddie, marching. Eddie, with the brim of his decayed old Stetson tipped down against the sun glare, keeping on at that steady, relentless shuffle. No hurry, in Eddie. No nervousness, that you could see. And Burr, waiting for that. Wanting it, and not getting it. That faint amused compression of the lips gone from Burr, now.

Hell, Burr, he's just a whip of a kid. Whatever he's got, you can shave it. But don't let it run too long. He'll rattle when he sees you pull. Better get it going, Burr. . . .

Chubby Arns' voice came out of remote gray distance. "Here it comes," and it was Burr taking the lead. Burr's hand making its tricky twist, and then the whip of flame, the hard, slamming concussion between the street's scabby falsefronts.

The bullet whistled and spurted a snake's-head of dust at the kid's boots. Then Eddie Lykkens' gun came level. It kicked before Burr's arm could steady again. And then Burr Macklin was tilting like an axed oak, teetering on the balls of his feet. . . .

Doors burst open, and Ringgold was suddenly alive again. A tide of humanity swept into the street. I felt the pent-up breath break from my lungs. And at that moment I saw Nancy. Nancy, running out of Perry's Mercantile, running with her dark hair flying behind her like a flag, towards Eddie. And pride surged in me like the vibration of a great bell ringing. Nancy. She must have followed me into town. And in the showdown, Nancy had understood. She could have stopped it, and she had let it go on.

I swung around stiffly, the untasted drink still clutched in my hand.

"Never thought the kid would have it in him," Chubby said. "Hard to size 'em up, sometimes."

I downed my drink, barely hearing him. I was staring out through the window at the crowd milling around Eddie Lykkens. I saw Zeb's chunky figure breasting through the crowd, his right hand mittened in a blood-soaked bandanna. Then that bloody hand was proudly around Eddie's shoulders, and in a kind of vague, detached way as I was remembering something I'd put down at the start of this story. *Mankind has always loved the strong.*

I looked back at Chubby and murmured absently: "Eddie's joined the tribe." And then, for just a second, I wondered why Chubby Arns gave me that startled puzzled look.



It was a red and reckless trail Dalzell rode . . . but somewhere ahead, he knew, waited a Judas partner to whom he could pay a dead man's debt. . . .

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By CHET ALBERTS

Blacksmith Benedict forged himself a difficult creed, one that few men were strong enough to live up to . . . and only he would die for.

ED BENEDICT, the peg-legged blacksmith who'd recently set up his forge in Malpai, had just one friend in the world. That was his helper, a stunted little Mex kid called Alamo. According to Malpai folk, Alamo was as thoroughly worthless a citizen as the smith himself. An old Dragoon Colt sagged from the kid's thin waist—a rusted, useless weapon which, aside from his regard for Ed, was perhaps the most important thing in the little Mexican's life.

For Ed, despite his bulging sinews, was looked upon as a coward, a man who flatly refused to stand up and fight with guns or fists either for himself or his neighbors.

There was, of course, a story behind Benedict's refusal to take a man's part in the roistering, violent frontier life—a story of a night of gunflame, when Ed Benedict found that he had shot and killed by accident his young cowboy saddle-pard.

That tragedy had eventually brought him to a deaconship in an obscure little Texas church—and to a firmly fixed belief which had only gained him years of lonely exile. And now, with the clattering hoofbeats of Sheriff Beal's citizen posse fading along the rocky trail, he recalled the bitterness of the past half hour, when the grim lawman had stopped before the door of the little smithy.

"Malpai's got no use for a feller who makes his livin' here but is too damn holy to fight for his town," the sheriff had said. "You run out on a manhunt once before, an' this is your last chance to prove yourself a man. If you don't, likely the boys will fit you to a feather overcoat—with a tar linin'—when they come back. Doan's wild bunch raided Pueblo, murdered three men in cold blood an' gutted the bank. They're headed this way, an' we're fixin' it so's

they'll never see Malpai. Grab a gun an' come on!"

The fact that Ed Benedict didn't own a gun; hadn't shot one for twenty years, or that the only horse he could ride was an old glandered-up plow-horse that never went faster than a walk, made little difference. The important thing was that Ed Benedict, able-bodied despite his wooden leg, had refused to join them.

"The Lord says to turn the other cheek, Sheriff," said the smith. "Also the fact that you're wearin' a badge don't give you the right to go agin' the Lord's word that it's a sin to take the life of a feller critter. Peace go with you, brother—an' I hope you don't ketch 'em!"

"If we don't, you'll be findin' yourself another town to live in right quick," said the sheriff flatly, and wheeled off.

There had been other towns, a succession of them. Some of them he had been told to leave, after turning his back on belligerent cowboys aching to try Ed's fighting skill. He had been ridden out on rails; had been canteened out of mining camps; had been exiled from half the wild cowtowns along the cattle trails. From then on, life had resolved itself into a ceaseless quest of peace with his fellow-man. And there was no peace. . . .

"Somewhere, some day, we'll find a place in this world where fellers think of other things beside fightin' an' killin'," he told little Alamo. And the Mex kid smiled.

"I am sure of it, *patron*," he said. "I—Augusto Angelo Maria Juan Sanchez y Fuente—shall help you to make the world a good place." And the trust in the limpid brown eyes of the half-loco little Mex made up, to the troubled Benedict, for the hard, lonely years.

SO ENGROSSED was he in his job of mending the iron wagon rim that cool morning, that he didn't look up until the shadows of mounted men darkened the smithy's door. Benedict, turned, wiping his great hands on his fire-blackened leather apron.

"Hey, Peg-leg," a harsh voice called. "We want new plates all around—pronto. An' send this breed out for grub while we're waitin'."

The leader pushed back his sweat-stained black hat, showing an expanse of shining, hairless pate.

Benedict scratched his head. "If you're headin' for the Border, as I reckon you are," he said, "I got to have my helper to make this a good an' quick job. There's fifty miles of sharp lava rock between here an'—"

Baldy Doan strode up grinning. "We ain't said where we're headin'. Get goin'." His gun-muzzle jammed against the smith's paunch, and his left hand shot out suddenly, taking the horseshoer off balance. As Benedict crashed down, his peg-leg broke off half a foot from the end.

Ed Benedict was a good blacksmith, and with the outlaw's help he shoed and nailed the plates in short order.

The bandits left, and Ed Benedict ruefully surveyed his broken peg-leg. Yet there was a gleam of grim amusement in his eyes, which faded as the crash of gunfire came to him from the direction of the bank. There were a few shrill yells, and then the rapid pound of hoofs as the outlaws rode off. Then Ed was half-stumbling out of his shop.

Through the open door of the looted bank, he saw the figure of the teller slumped half out of his cage. Something caught his eye at the entrance, almost at his feet. It was the pathetic crumpled body of Alamo. In his hand was the enormous Dragoon model Colt; on his chest was a slow-spreading red stain. Clumsily, the smith knelt. . . .

"Patron," the kid gasped, "me, I—I did the best I could to pay them for your so useful wooden leg. You must get another, to help make the world a good place. . . ." And then he died.

In the eyes of Ed Benedict was a look which no man had ever seen before. Lumberingly he got to his feet, brushed one hand across his sweat-damp brow, and looked down the trail where the dust of the outlaws'

going was long since settled. Then he limped into the bank.

When he came out he was carrying a sawed-off shotgun.

To Ed, his every movement seemed a slow, lagging nightmare as he made his way back to his shed, shook out the harness for old Whitey and led the horse into the traces of his buckboard. A hell of a chance he'd have, taking after that bunch of fast-riding killers, in a rattletrap buckboard! And they, with the bank loot and little Alamo's blood on their hands, were fresh shod, by the best blacksmith within four days' ride!

Perhaps, because old Whitey hadn't been in harness for months, he was feeling good. Or perhaps, he could sense that Ed was fighting against time. . . .

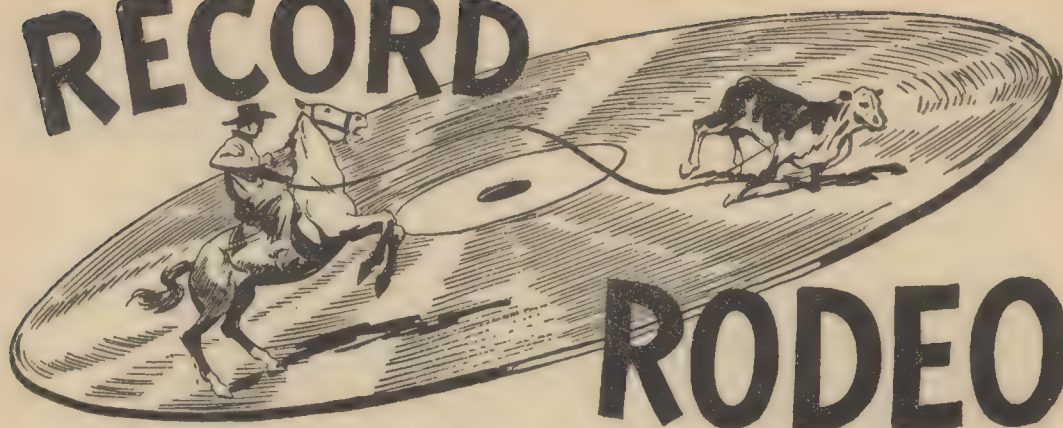
It was just as he rounded a high, rocky shoulder that he heard the crack of a gun, and the whine of a bandit bullet. Then he leaned forward and laid leather into the old horse. Balancing almost by a miracle on the seat, the reins wrapped around the whip socket, he charged into the outlaw guns as they stood there, on foot. But, though their bullets blinded him with his own blood, he jerked up the ten-gauge, pulled both triggers. . . . After that, he knew no more.

Back in Malpai, where Ed Benedict is looked upon as the first citizen, men will make an extra day's ride to get him to do one of his re-plating jobs. And they like to tell the story of how the posse found him, as they returned from their wild-goose chase empty-handed, with two dead outlaws nearby, and two badly wounded killers lying along the rocky trail.

"The first thing he wanted was a granite gravestone for Alamo," Sheriff Beal smiles reminiscently. The next thing was a new peg-leg. An' the third was to get that old Dragoon Colt fixed up so that it could shoot. "They can smite me on one cheek," he says as we're bringing him back, "an' they can smite me on the other. But after that—well, I just naturally spit on my hands an' start in to fight."

"An' the damndest thing," the sheriff continues. "When we got a look at them bandits' horses, not one of 'em had a plate left on. They shore got a sloppy job of horseshoein' done to tackle these lava rocks. If they'd been smart, they'd have stopped at Ed's smithy an' had him fix 'em up proper!"

RECORD



RODEO

By Joey Sasso

WE VALUE your opinions on these record sessions, fans, and we'd very much like to hear from you. Sound off, and you may be a prizewinner. For the best letter discussing the reviews in each issue, the writer will receive, absolutely free, one of the best new albums of Western music. The writers of the two next best letters will each find in the mail, with our compliments, one of the latest Western releases. Address your letter to Joey Sasso, care of this magazine, at 205 East 42nd Street, New York 17, N. Y.

LIGHT up, pardners, and set a spell. Or, better still, mosey on down to the music corral and size up the latest string of records. Some are kind of wild and some are gentle and purty, but they're all jumping.

There's lots of ballads and boogie and blues, and torch songs and tender vocals. Step right up and take your pick!

LET'S SAIL AWAY TO HEAVEN! YOU MISSED YOUR CHANCE LAST NIGHT

ELTON BRITT AND ROSALIE ALLEN
WITH THE SKYTOPPERS
(RCA Victor)

Elton Britt and Rosalie Allen duet on a pair of exclusive first releases for RCA Victor. Topside is another special by the brothers Spencer—Tim and Glenn, writers of the *Grasshopper Heart* included in the release of a Fontane Sisters-Sons of the Pioneers edition.

It is doubled with another topper, written especially for the ace dispensers of rustic rhythms by one of the top guitarists in New York, Billy Mure. The Skytoppers lend their usual string support.

THE RHUMBA BOOGIE YOU PASS ME BY

HANK SNOW (THE SINGING RANGER
AND HIS RAINBOW RANCH BOYS)
(RCA Victor)

Here's one kind of Snow that's always welcome in any clime—Hank, that is, who comes up on RCA Victor with another zippy original as punch-packed as his *I'm Moving On* and *The Golden Rocket*. The first side traces the progress of the rumba when it left Havana and came up against our native boogie woogie rhythms. The second hunk of Hank, also an original, is heavy with sentiment and lament. Hank's Rainbow Ranch Boys back him up.

NO ONE BUT YOU WITHIN MY HEART

PEE WEE KING AND HIS GOLDEN
WEST COWBOYS
(RCA Victor)

With their *Tennessee Waltz* waltzing away with the best-selling honors all over the country, Pee Wee King and Redd Stewart paired pens to write this first tune. Redd is partnered on the torch-carrying v.r. by brother Gene. Pee Wee and his Golden West Cowboys, who are video favorites in the Golden

West, offer on the reverse side, a vocal version of the famous Spanish classic, *La Golondrina*. The electric banjo solo by Gene Scholer is a musical innovation completely unlike the usual banjo sound. In addition to Gene's specialty there's a vocal by Redd.

**MISSIN' MY KISSIN'
YOU CAN'T PICK ALL THE ROSES**
RUSTY GABBARD
(MGM)

A tricky blues number on the first side gives MGM's promising Folk star Rusty Gabbard a chance to do some fine and fancy singing on his latest release. We say "fine and fancy" because Rusty trots out for his vocal chore one of the ear-catchingest half-yodel deliveries it's been the pleasure of our ears to catch. His vocal isn't all that makes the side worth hearing, though. There's a plenty effective harmonica noodling around in the background and on a solo of its own. On the flip side, Rusty serves up a tune he wrote himself. This one is a pretty country ballad which moves along nice and steadily. It might be that the tune is his 'own; then again it might be simply that Rusty is a good vocalist—one or the other or both, this side is outstanding!

BEAUTIFUL BROWN EYES
ARTHUR "GUITAR BOOGIE" SMITH
AND DEL AND DON
(MGM)

Arthur "Guitar Boogie" Smith's new MGM release definitely puts the finishing touch to the several recently-released recordings in which artists either sing with themselves or accompany themselves once or twice. In a number called *Beautiful Brown Eyes*, Art accompanies himself seven times, using five different instruments. Through the medium of re-recording, the young maestro of the guitar (and, as past releases have shown, of the mandolin and banjo) cut and re-cut his waxing eight different times in order to become quite literally a one-man-band. On the first he handled a lead guitar; on the second the rhythm guitar. Then, he added a bass fiddle part. From there on there were two violin additions, an accordion part, a second lead guitar, and a mandolin section. To put it mildly, the result is nothing short

of sensational. The one-man talent angle of the record becomes even more impressive, however, when one learns that Art also penned words and music of the number. In itself, matter of fact, the tune is so good that it's presented a second time on the flip side of the record, this time in a smooth vocal version by Del and Don. The mood here is nicely contrasted with that of its disc-mate and there's added appeal in this different rendition.

**DON'T MAKE LOVE TO MARY (WITH
MABEL ON YOUR MIND)**
CHEATERS NEVER PROSPER
TEX WILLIAMS
(Capitol)

Tex tallows a sure-fire winner with this top-side which he capers through at rapid speed, in a humorous vein. For a flipside Tex "sermonizes" on this one written by disc jockey Ira Cook and Greene and Kilpatrick. The tune is new and exclusive on Capitol Records.

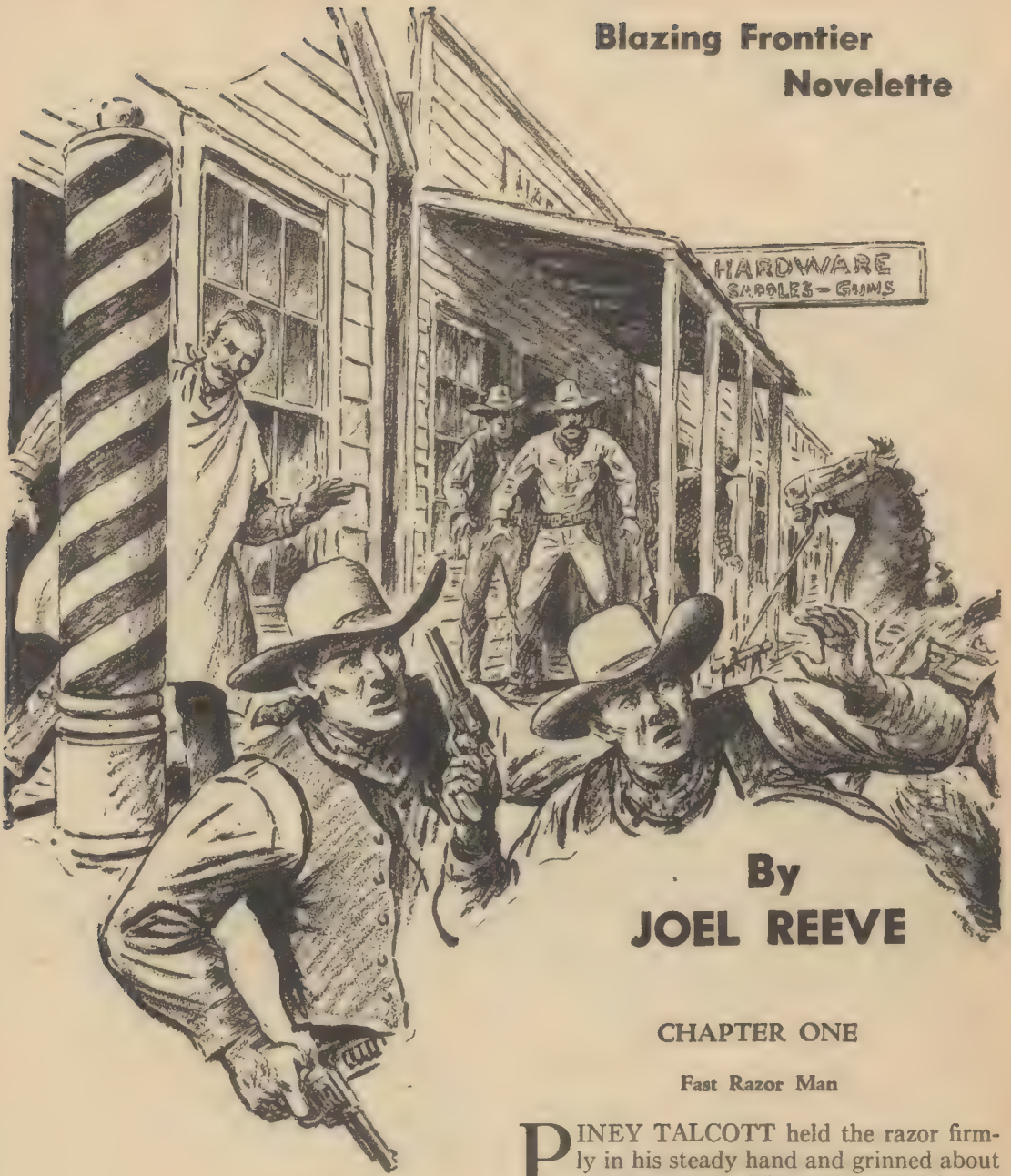
HOMINY GRITS
IT'S MY LAZY DAY
SMILEY BURNETTE
(Capitol)

Folk favorite Smiley Burnette socks across his best wax twosome to date! Topside has good "hometown" flavor and is intimately warbled by the Westerner, who wrote it and has been performing it many seasons, receiving excellent reaction. Second side, also written by Smiley, gets relaxed treatment from Burnette and should trip to the top.

TAILOR MADE WOMAN
STACK-O-LEE
TENNESSEE ERNIE-JOE "FINGERS"
CARR
(Capitol)

For the first time Tennessee is coupled with "Fingers" Carr, celebrated ragtime pianist. Tune is slanted toward the Western and hillbilly field as well as a popular tune. Tennessee warbles it at fast beat, aided by "Fingers" agile piano. Merle Travis plays the hot guitar choruses. Reverse is an old public domain melody dressed up with a new lyric by Lou Busch.

Blazing Frontier Novelette



By
JOEL REEVE

CHAPTER ONE

Fast Razor Man

When they turned his shop into a Saturday night bloodbath, Barber Piney Talcott lathered his town with lead—and shaved it with a Colt.

PINEY TALCOTT held the razor firmly in his steady hand and grinned about the shop. Tom Mason stretched in the chair, half asleep. It was a happy Saturday night in peaceful Saddleville. Then Slip Becker came in, glowering, barely nodded at Piney and went to sit upon the stool and watch the pool players.

The balls clicked and the small fire glowed gently, for it was early spring. Piney ran the razor over Lawyer Mason's bony jaw and asked softly about Junior and the ailing Mrs. Mason.

BLOOD, SWEAT AND SIXGUNS



The razor licked out, and the sheriff's arm showed red. . .

He knew them all, every man, woman and child in Saddleville. Outside, the patient horses at the rack hip-shifted and saddle leather whispered and Piney thought of his own little spread, the Corner Z, where he was now running cattle. He had come a long

way since the slum days—a mighty long way. He could thank Saddleville for it all—he truly loved his town.

He soaped Tom Mason again, speculating about Slip Becker, wondering why the young Texan had been so dour of late. He wrinkled his sharp nose and crinkled the corners of his kindly brown eyes, worrying a bit. Slip Becker worked for Lige Moran and both men were courting Alice Maylan. Therein lay dynamite enough to

blast the peace of Saddleville to the sky.

Out west, in the shadow of the mesa, Piney's own little spread lay next to the rolling acres of Lige Moran's Kaytee Ranch. Piney knew things about Lige and John Strang, his partner, which were better left unsaid. Piney was for peace, first, last and always.

Lawyer Mason came bolt upright in the chair and rubbed his chin.

He drawled, "Cut me close, didn't you, Piney? What's on your mind?"

"Just thinkin' about my Herefords," grinned Piney. The laugh wrinkles made a network on his tanned skin and Mason smiled in response. Piney went on, "I always look forward to Sunday and Monday more'n the rest of the week."

Mason said, "You're a rancher in your heart, but you're a good barber, Piney. Never give up your razor. I know you don't carry a gun—so keep your razor sharp."

He shrugged into his coat, nodded grimly and walked out. The cold air swirled in behind him and Piney stood, his smile frozen, his thoughts whirling around the words of the lawyer.

Again the door opened, this time with a bang. Two tall, wide-shouldered men came in and stood looking about in the light of the lamps. The pool game immediately became less hilarious, a waiting customer hesitated in his progress towards the single chair.

Lige Moran moved forward gracefully and said, "Need a trim, Piney. And a shave." The customer unobtrusively resumed his perusal of an ancient *Police Gazette*, sacrificing his turn.

LIGE MORAN was a tall man. His luxurious brown hair was wavy, his regular features marred only by the twisted bridge of his nose and the thinness of his lips. He did not glance at Slip Becker, but Piney could feel the tension as Slip sat upright on a high stool, ostensibly watching the pool players.

Slip was wearing his six-shooter. When Lige sat in the chair he failed to remove his belt. Piney slowly picked up the shears and let his glance rest upon the bulky form of John Strang.

No one knew much about John in Saddleville. He was silent, almost morose. He was wide-shouldered and tapered to the tiniest feet in the county, and he always

wore the fanciest of boots, being inordinately proud of his shapely underpinnings. He wore two guns, night and day. There were people who said he slept with those guns.

The country had been peaceful for some time—since the cattle wars of the 'seventies. Piney Talcott had come to Saddleville because it was comparatively settled and calm. In the late 'eighties Saddleville was settling down to prosperity and growth and the farmers already had their ploughs in the earth. When Lige and John had bought the Kaytee, all had been well enough. . . .

A figure passed the barber shop and through the windows, Piney recognized the pleasing outlines of Alice Maylan, on her way home from the little dressmaking shop she operated down the street. Four times a day he saw her go by in this fashion, and each time he looked hard and earnestly, hoping that no one would notice. She was a dark, smiling girl, all curves and full of energy and a love of life which delighted the lean barber.

Slip Becker got down off the stool and started for the door. Piney felt the tingle up and down his spine which always presaged trouble.

John Strang came from the wall, past a man who was trying to bank the eightball in the side pocket. He did not seem to move quickly, but he intercepted Slip without apparent effort.

His heavy voice said, "Hi, Slip. Want you to do me an errand."

The young Texan's eyes darkened. He was employed by Moran and Strang; it was Saturday evening. He could not in all conscience refuse an errand, as he was foreman and therefore a responsible employee.

He said impatiently, "What is it, John?"

"Fork your cayuse and ride over to Lawyer Mason's ranch," said Strang. "Give his foreman this note." He handed a folded slip of paper to the Texan.

Slip hesitated one moment. From under the spread sheet, Lige Moran extended an arm strong as oak, thrusting Piney aside. The barber moved reluctantly, knowing that Lige's other hand was reaching for a gun.

Slip was unfolding the note. The pool players stopped their game; one of them dove for the rear exit. The others began melting away.

Strang's voice said sharply, "You got no

call to go snoopin' in my messages, Slip!"

In a moment violence would break forth—it was in the voice of Strang, the strained pallidity of the fiery young Slip, in Lige's rock-like arm. Above all things Piney Talcott hated violence. . . .

Slip said, "There's no message here, John. You're just doin' the dirty work of your partner."

Slip was backing away, waving the fake message in one hand while he made a lightning draw with the other. Strang, faltering for a split second, was covered. He stood, hands dangling, face black with wrath and chagrin.

UNDER the sheet Lige's hands moved. Slip was saying bitterly, "I quit, John. Lige and you together may be too much for me. I'm peaceable enough. John. But don't push me too far—"

The lad was retreating, ready to go out the back way and let the occasion slip by without incident. Piney held his breath, watching Lige's hand under the sheet. Slip wanted peace, too, then. Piney was suddenly overwhelmingly grateful to the Texan for not downing Strang in the shop, when he had the drop on him. In another second Slip would be gone and the thing ended. . . .

Lige shoved harder against Piney, throwing aside the sheet, leaping from the chair, his gun drawn. Slip was almost through the door.

John said, "Get him, Lige!"

The gun went up. Piney held his breath, his face going white. Slip was defenseless, the open door between his gun hand and Lige.

Piney dove forward. The sharp points to the scissors flicked out in his own iron barber's grip. They caught Lige's shirt, barely scraping the skin. The gun went off, very loudly, frightening Piney by its very noise. But he hung on, spoiling Lige's aim. Slip went through the door and ran for his horse as John drew and sent a shot echoing into the darkness.

Then Lige had turned and the thin lips were drawn from white teeth like fangs. In the eyes of the handsome man was a leaping fire which Piney had never seen before. The latent passion was like an oven of annealing metal and Piney shrank back a step, panting. "I only wanted peace, Lige. It wouldn't be good to kill Slip. It would

only start trouble all around. Even you don't need trouble."

"You skinny, long-nosed runt!" Lige grated. "Butting in on my business? Why, you damned barber!"

His fist came from nowhere and landed on Piney's cheek, knocking him into the arms of Strang.

"Send him back!" Lige ordered.

Strang slammed a long right onto Piney's nose and the bone crunched and the pain took away his breath. He tried to fight back, but tears blinded him and Lige blackened both his eyes with another smash. He felt the sickness coming, but could not quite manage to faint. His arms flailed at empty air—the two men beat him scientifically. Time ran into years, it seemed, before they were gone, cursing, laughing a little, but with ferocity.

Then he was bent over the sink, washing himself, seeing his own blood, diluted by the water, pinkish, running down into the pail below. Not even red blood, he thought miserably. Not an ounce of fight in him. They had slapped him about as though he were a child.

He knew now why his herd had not increased. He knew why the Herefords had not been productive. He was too close to the Kaytee. They had been friendly enough on the surface, but he had refused to sell to Lige and John Strang last spring, when they were expanding all over the countryside. The mere saving of Slip Becker was not enough to bring on this manhandling.

He raised his head and looked at his face in the mirror. His nose was a pulp, his eyes seemed slits in a puffy mess of flesh. He steadied himself with spread hands.

The door to the street opened.

Behind him a soft voice said, "Slip asked me to thank you and tell you he would be in the hills near your ranch—Oh! Piney! They beat you!"

In the mirror he could see the reflection of her lively features. He saw the concern, the momentary revulsion at the ugly sight. Into his soul the iron bit, deeper than the pit of hell.

He mumbled through jagged teeth, "It's all right, Alice. . . . Got to see a doctor. . . . I'll be all right. . . . Never was a purty man. . . ."

Then, to his final humiliation, he did faint, at the feet of the girl he worshipped.

WHEN he saw the girl again, he was lying on the pallet in the rear of the barber shop and she was dipping warm water from a basin. There was a blanket over the window and the girl moved quietly, turning towards him. He thought through the pain how beautiful she was and how calm and strong.

Then there was a knock at the rear door and she swerved, still carrying the wet cloth, listening against the panel. Someone whispered and she drew back the bolt. Lawyer Mason slipped in and locked the door behind him.

Alice said, "Have you heard anything?"

The bony lawyer was solemn. He was a slender man, past middle age, a clever man, and Piney had always liked him.

He said, "Yes. Lige is striking the entire countryside. He bought out the Bar X, the Ace and the little H-E outfit. Now he is cleaning out the nesters along the river."

The girl said, "He will claim the nesters rustled his cattle—why is he doing it, Mr. Mason? Why must Lige begin a war?"

Lawyer Tom Mason said slowly, "Some men lust for power. It is not within them to live and let live. My little place—Piney's tiny ranch, the nesters—add them up and they mean one big outfit. He'll be after us next, Piney and me."

Piney pushed at the edges of the pallet. He could sit up, he found, without further pain. A momentary dizziness came and went—he was wiry from riding Sundays and Mondays on the ranch and working in the shop the remainder of the week.

He said, "Have they run off my cattle? The sheriff—"

Mason said kindly, "I don't know how far they have gone, Piney. But the sheriff is north and won't be back. You know Lige and John elected him."

Alice came with the hot cloth and bathed the edges of splints newly adjusted. Piney breathed through his mouth and knew the doctor had come and gone. His nose was as large as a balloon.

He said, "Thank you, Alice—has Slip turned up?"

She frowned worriedly, "He's watching your outfit. He must have warned your men by now."

Piney got to his feet, tried a step or two. He muttered, "They beat the tar outa me, didn't they?"

He found himself steady enough. He pulled at the buckle of his belt and reached for the sombrero on a peg behind the door. Absently he knotted a reboso around his neck and slipped on the vest which was the working garment of the country.

He said, "I'm no fighter. You're no fighter, either, Mr. Mason. You warned me, I remember."

Mason said, "What are you going to do, Piney?"

Piney looked at the girl. He said, "It's 'most Sunday by now. My men'll expect me. Got to ride out to the ranch."

"If Lige's killers are riding they'll get you easy! You don't even own a gun!"

"Couldn't shoot it if I did," nodded Piney. His face was a grotesque mask of bruises and bandages. "But I never aimed to barber all my life; I wanted to ranch. Me and cow brutes—we get along. If people'd let me alone, I'd be done all right, so if I got to get killed, it'll be as a rancher, not a barber."

There was a little silence in the shop.

PINEY walked to the back door. The outside was bright with moonlight and Alice followed him to the little barn where he stabled his fine sorrel cow pony, Jenkins. He saddled up, trying not to move his head too quickly, stifling the pain.

Alice said in a low voice, "Slip will be on your side. When he finds they beat you, he'll be wild."

Piney mounted and looked down at her. He said, "I wouldn't want Slip to fight my battles. I got to think, Miss Alice. I'm cornered, I reckon. I can think better at the ranch, with the boys around me."

"You're a good man, Piney," she whispered, her white face staring up at him. "You stand for the best in Saddleville."

He stammered, "Thanks, Miss Alice. I'll do what I can. I'll—thanks!" He clapped heels to the pony and rode northwest towards the ranch.

He was at ease in the saddle, almost as though he had been born to it, like Slip Becker or Lige Moran. But it had taken years for him to attain that seat in the leather. Things had never come easy to him, not since his father had died in Brooklyn, leaving him to grow as a street urchin, a newsboy, a boot-black and finally a runaway from a stepfather who abused him. He had learned to barber from a kindly Italian

in Baltimore, and his trade made it easier.

At eighteen he had felt the lure of the West. Like thousands of other homeless folk, he had drifted, barbering his way, saving a little when he could, seeking to find security. Ranching had intrigued him, and in Saddleville he had found his place. He had bought the Corner Z, brought in a few Herefords with his last money and seemed about ready to make a start.

But the habit of barbering had proven stronger than he imagined. The smells and sounds of the shop, the pool table's fun and camaraderie—and the steady income which brought feed for the horses and equipment for the small but sturdy house he had improved so well—kept him on the job five days per week. But his heart was in the ranch.

He rode now through the cottonwoods, then over the hill and along the trail to the creek. He crossed the water and knew that the two miles ahead were fraught with the danger of Lige Moran's wrath and avidity. Still he rode, head high, never deviating from his straight path.

Slip Becker should be somewhere about. Alice had said that he was keeping an eye on things. Undoubtedly Slip had warned Jake and Louie and Pico, the three men who took care of the Corner Z. Jake and Louie were oldtimers, and Pico was a young Mexican lad. None of them could be called fighting men—they were cowhands, working men.

But there were guns out at the ranch and any man would defend himself, Piney knew. Even Piney had tried feebly to fight back against the fists of Lige and John Strang.

Again the wave of humiliation swept over him, as he remembered how Alice had come to his aid.

She was Slip Becker's girl, Piney knew now. Lige was evidently out of the running, and Piney shrewdly figured that as the reason for the abrupt action of the Kaytee against the small ranchers. Lige must have got his walking papers and immediately thrown off all restraint. The attack upon Slip was a logical development.

He rode slowly down the draw. Suddenly, the cow pony clattered a fore hoof upon metal, sidestepping immediately, almost unseating his rider. Piney reined in, dropped to earth. The moonlight shone on a huddled figure propped against a boulder.

Piney bent and picked up the revolver which Jenkins had kicked.

A husky voice said, "Musta been asleep. . . . that you, Piney? Knew you had t' come this way."

Piney said, "Slip! They got you!"

"Plenty, they got me," said Slip drily. "They got you, too. They got Jake and Louie. It was a fight and I chipped in, but Strang was layin' for me with a rifle—"

Piney said, "The—the ranch?"

"Sorry," mumbled Slip. "It's still smokin', I reckon—they run off your cattle . . . Pico got away, I think. . . ."

Piney stood silent for a moment, looking up at the moon. The light fell across his grotesque features, bathing him in a white glow. His Adam's apple worked convulsively, once, twice. A tear ran down his bruised cheek.

Then he was bending over Slip and his voice was calm. He said, "They own the whole range, now. Tom Mason is quitting. They'll be back lookin' for us, Slip. Town won't be safe."

Slip said, "I got it in the chest. I can't live long. You get up in the hills beyond the mesa . . ."

Piney said, "Sure. That's a good idea. C'mon."

He picked up the Texan, not without effort, and supported him to where Jenkins stood waiting. He listened to Slip curse, but got him in the saddle somehow. He turned the horse towards town and started walking. It was not easy to walk in the boots, and Slip kept leaning first one way, then the other, and finally began to rave incoherently, about Alice, about his lost job, cursing Lige Moran and John Strang.

The sun was mounting the horizon when they stumbled into town. Piney's feet were swollen inside the boots, but Slip Becker was still alive. The pallet behind the barber shop groaned beneath the tossing of the Texan, and Piney went after Alice and the doctor. Then he carefully unsaddled and stabled Jenkins.

CHAPTER TWO

Blood Bath

WEEKS can fly by like swallows winging south, Piney thought. It was late summer, now. Saddleville lay in the hot sun and panted—waiting,

fretful, changed, seeming to dread what it knew must come.

Piney stood in the door of his shop. It was Saturday and the sheriff had just left. Down the street Alice Maylan paused in her sewing and wiped perspiration from her brow. Lawyer Tom Mason crossed the street to his office, glancing up and down, hesitating as he saw Piney, then going inside without speaking.

There was a cloud of dust at the north-western end of Main Street. Two riders loped along, sweaty and dusty. They clattered down the street and no one ventured forth to greet them. They drew up in front of Piney's shop and hitched their horses to the rail.

Without a word Piney went inside and got towels. There was soap and water and tubs in the back—an innovation providing baths for the riders before they got trimmed and shaven for the night's doings. There was a new saloon across the street now, with a few women and several tinhorn gamblers. In a small way, Saturday was a big night in Saddleville these days—exclusively maintained for the huge Kaytee Ranch and its friends and business acquaintances.

Lige and John Strang entered the shop. Piney said, "Your baths are ready, gents."

"Sounds like a valet, don't he, John?" said Lige.

"Sounds like a damn barber," said Strang. There was no humor in the dour man. His eyes were like gimlets, always boring into Piney. Ever since the night of the beating John had been suspicious and Piney had to be very careful. . . .

When he had quietly reopened his shop after the funerals of Jake and Louie, going about his business as usual, people had at first stared, then snickered, then accepted him as a man who had been beaten and had bowed to fate. It had been pretty lonely in those months. But it had been worse to see Saddleville change.

Lige said casually, "Saw the sheriff just now. Said everything was quiet in town. Said you wouldn't talk. That's smart, Piney."

Strang said, "Piney wants to stay alive. Some men'll do anything to stay alive."

Piney shrugged, smiling weakly. He still bore scars which would never disappear. His nose was, strangely enough, twisted in the same way Lige's was skewered. He wondered idly who had broken Lige's nose—

then stopped, for fear some emotion would show on his face.

Lige said, "Shoot you a game of pool for a dollar, John." Lige was always cheerful these days.

He was calling on Alice again, since Slip's disappearance.

Slip had recovered—at least enough to remove to the hills beyond the mesa. The doctor had kept his mouth shut, as doctors do, and Alice had helped to pack him out to the hidden cabin in a buckboard.

Piney handed down the cues to the two cattle barons and went back to stand in the doorway.

The balls began to click and Lige kept up a steady stream of conversation, kidding John, openly confident, daring break shots which gave his opponent every opportunity to run the table, then capitalizing on Strang's misses. But in the end, John won by a ball and was paid off.

Then they went into the back and Piney could hear Lige railing at his luck and the splashing of water in the big tubs as the two bathed. In a moment he would trim Lige's hair, then shave both of them. He would stand over them with the razor in his hand, the sharp edge at the jugular. . . .

And one would be watching while the other submitted to his ministrations. Lige and John were smart. He was the only barber in town and they needed him—but even after these months they did not wholly trust him.

Especially Strang. The big man was suspicious of everyone and everything. He was the bulwark upon which the ever-increasing Kaytee holdings were built.

And the Kaytee was growing by leaps and bounds. Piney's own Herefords were helping to improve the stock and the new calves would be good ones. The grass was good and there was plenty of it. Round-up would find the herd numbering thousands. There was no one to stop its increase.

The sheriff had believed what he wanted to believe—that the nesters were rustlers and needed running out, that Piney had been the victim of a hit and run band of thieves; that Lawyer Mason had sold out of his own free will, that Lige and John, his patrons, were running things for the best. A cut on the gambling proceeds of the new saloon, the Keyhole, had much more than made the sheriff happy.

PINEY stropped his razor. He had several of the blades, Sheffield and Toledo, and he was very careful and proud of them. He tested this one on a hair and found it satisfactory. He held out his hand—it was steady. Barbering developed phenomenal hands, of course.

He heard John Strang say, "You can laugh it off, but we're losin' cattle."

Lige's reply was lost in the splashing, but Strang said stubbornly, "There could be rustlers in the hills. I'm sendin' some boys out Monday to look around. Now that we're big, we're fair game."

Lige said plainly, "We can afford to lose a few head. But you're right—a hangin' or two will warn others."

Piney folded the razor and slipped it into its case. He stepped out to the street and glanced down towards Alice's tiny shop. After a moment she came out and looked his way and he made a motion with his left hand. She touched her hair with the fingers of her right hand and turned back into the shop.

Piney went past the pool table and to the back window. He waited, timing the bathers behind the thick partition he had put in to close off the baths. Alice came in very quietly, along the back way, concealed by a fence Piney also had erected to shut in the yards behind the row of stores.

He bent close to her and whispered, "Monday. Tell Pico to run out now and have Slip move the cattle and lie low."

She said, "He's scarcely begun. They caught on awful quick."

"They keep close track, now that they're big," said Piney regretfully. "Slip'll have to drive those he has."

She nodded, smiling at Piney. "You're very smart," she whispered. "Don't let them harm you."

Then she was gone. Piney wandered back to his chair and was waiting when Lige came out and sat down. John Strang wore his gun and waited on a straight chair, tilted back, his hat over his eyes, disdaining to read the papers. Piney patiently cut Lige's hair, then shaved him with consummate speed and skill.

The rancher got up and said, "You're a swell barber, Piney. I got to give you credit."

Strang lowered himself into the chair and said harshly, "And you should stick to it.

Never forget that. It's the job for you."

Piney dropped Lige's money into the drawer and said humbly, "I learned a lesson oncè. That was enough."

He looked straight down into the cruel eyes of John Strang and began shaving him. Lige whistled, watching, a crooked smile on his lips.

OUT on the street a dog barked. Then there was the clatter of hoofs and a shout. Lige wheeled to stare through the window. A gambler was having trouble with his mount. Lawyer Tom Mason's small boy, Junior, had run off the sidewalk directly into the path of the bolting animal.

Piney went past Lige, folding his razor, thrusting it into his pocket. He was wearing walking boots, with ample heels. He ran flat-footed, but with great speed. He bent, never losing a stride, and caught Junior's clothing in his grasp. He was on his way as the horse reared and struck with forefeet, wildly.

One hoof smashed directly at Piney's head. He saw the shadow, ducked, and tossed the child for the safety of the boardwalk. Junior landed on his feet, sat down and began to squawl. His father came running, pale as a ghost.

Piney ducked, whirled and grabbed. He caught the bridle of the animal, clung to it, although lifted off his feet. He spoke to the horse soothingly, bringing its head down, holding onto one ear, forcing the animal to his will. The gambler reeled in his saddle and fell off, drunk, into the street.

Piney hitched the quieted animal to the rail next to the Kaytee horses and went into the shop where Lige stared open-mouthed and John Strang sat upright in the chair, his sharp eyes burning.

Lige said, "That was pretty fast work, Piney."

Strang said harshly, "Six months ago he'd never have tried that."

Lige said, "That lesson he learned must've put him in better shape."

Piney wiped his hands on a damp towel, plunged his hot face into its coolness. His voice was weak and calm. "Always liked Junior. I'm ready to shave you now, John."

Strang stretched slowly in the chair. Lige fidgeted, his eyes going to where Lawyer Mason was scolding his child and sending him home, then back to Piney's bowed

shoulders. The scrape of the razor was the only sound.

At last the job was finished. Strang threw a coin to Piney and picked up his hat.

Lige turned at the door and said, "I dunno, Piney. Seems to me you've got quite active. You wouldn't have any ideas, would you? If you want satisfaction, I could take off these guns—seein' you don't tote shootin' irons."

Piney said quietly, "I told you I learned a lesson."

John Strang said viciously, "You'd have been dead long ago if I had my way, you snivelin' little character. I don't trust you, understand? And if I ever catch you one step off the reservation—you'll get it and quick!"

Piney said, "I've always known that, John."

They went out, Strang across to the Keyhole, Lige down to Alice's shop. Piney automatically cleaned the floor and went in back to straighten up. The lesser men of Kaytee would be in for their big night, and he would be busy until midnight.

He felt uneasy. He knew he had given himself partially away to his enemies. There had been no time to think—

He went back outside and Lawyer Tom Mason was there, his bony features pale.

Mason said, "All right, Piney. You can count me in."

Piney said mildly, "Not because I saved the boy. There's no use your coming in unless your mind is made up."

Mason said, "I was thinking of Mary and the kid. Now I can see that because of them I must throw in with you."

Piney said, "We just want you to be ready to defend us when something breaks. And to look up past records. And to be ready to say I was robbed and you were forced to sell."

"I know what to do," said Mason impatiently. "If we get into court I can handle it. But how are we to live long enough to get them into court?"

Piney said slowly, "We aim to stir them up, hurt them plenty when they fight us—beat their ears down and then take them to law!"

Mason said weakly, "The Kaytee? That big outfit? Just you and Slip and that Mexican boy?"

Piney said, "It'll take some time. Is

Junior all right? Cuts or bruises on him?"

Mason shook his head. "Junior's all right—but his father is shaky right now!"

PICO was a smooth-faced lad in his teens, slant-eyed, silent. He had been very fond of Jake and Louie, who had taught him so much about ranching. . . .

It was midnight and Pico was closing up the shop, turning out the lights, putting up the blinds against the drunks who loved to hear the crashing of glass. Piney said quietly, "Get the horses around back. I'll do a scout."

Piney went out on Main Street and Sad-dleville was a red riot of bawdy sounds. The Keyhole was going full blast. At the bar he had a drink, alone, his eyes going over the crowded saloon. Lige and John were sitting in the big poker game, others of the big Kaytee outfit were drinking, dancing with the raucous women, bucking the monte and faro games. Piney counted noses. He knew to the man the gunslinging strength of the Kaytee.

He finished his drink and went outside. It was a clear, cool night and he met Alice near her own small house and, in the shadows, she said, "You shouldn't go out tonight. They are getting on to things."

Piney said, "The time has got to come. In the open."

"We're not strong enough," she said. "I talked with Lige about the Kaytee. Without bragging, he told me of its strength. There are too few of us."

Piney said, "Lawyer Mason is in."

She spread her strong white hands. "This is a fighting matter. The courts will never settle this."

They could hear the hurdy-gurdy, the curses of the gamblers, the shrill laughter of the women.

Piney said, "It's for the town as much as anything. I could stand the beating, the loss of the ranch. I thought the ranch was everything in the world. But it was my shop, the kindness of our people, the gossip of the farmers, the little ranchers. It was home—and now it's not home any more."

She breathed, "I know. You're a builder, Piney. You want the land to belong to all, each according to his industry. You're right, as always, Piney."

He said, "You got a message for Slip? Pico says he won't lope with the herd 'til

tomorrow. Is there anything you want me to tell him?"

"Tell him to be careful—and to shoot straight," she said helplessly. She pressed his hand a moment, then walked away. Someone was coming, and Piney kept in the shadows until the homecomer passed by. Then he went swiftly to the passageway between his shop and the new fence and there was Pico with Jenkins and a sturdy little black pony.

They mounted wordlessly and rode out of town, following the remembered route. They came to the draw and rode out on the far end. It was a bit out of their way and they were in haste, yet by common consent they always rode past the blackened ruin of the Corner Z. It put iron into their spirits to see it lying there, awaiting rebirth.

They ascended the mesa, then turned and rode down an arroyo. They made a sharp turn and paused. Piney whistled and a man arose quietly from behind a rock, trailing a rifle.

Piney said, "Hi, Slip. You ought to be gone. Strang's after us."

Slip Becker came forward. In the dim light he seemed older, stooped. He said, "They got a herd slung over in Lost Canyon. Only two men watchin' it. I could only handle sixty, seventy critters myself. The three of us could run that herd and be to hell and gone before the weekend carouse is over . . . You always take Sunday and Monday off, Piney. They wouldn't know where you'd gone."

"They might suspect," said Piney. He thought of the incident of the runaway horse and Junior Mason, of John Strang's glittering, suspicious eyes.

Slip said sharply, "Otie Heath and Mack Summer are the two watching this herd. They were both in on the burnin' of the Corner Z."

Pico hissed between his teeth, like a snake. Piney slowly nodded his head.

He reached into the saddle bags on Jenkins' haunches. He withdrew two well-oiled, shiny Colt .44 revolvers. He found the worn cartridge belt Pico had supplied him. The two watched as he buckled on the guns. Then Slip nodded and said, "I threw the cows I swiped over in the valley beyond Lost Canyon. We can pick them up whenever the Kaytee wants to palaver . . ."

CHAPTER THREE

Six-Gun Shave

SLIP led. He had been lurking in the hills all through the months, so that now he knew every foot of land, every tree, every mesquite, every chaparral. They dismounted as they came to the canyon and Slip sent Pico up along the ridge with a rifle.

Piney said, "We got to give them a show."

"Like they gave Jake and Louie?" snarled Slip. The bitterness of waiting, the pain of his old wound had made Slip a different man, Piney thought. He lived only for revenge, now. He scarcely asked for Alice any more. He just wanted to know about Lige and John. He only wanted to destroy them.

Piney said quietly, "I'm giving them a chance."

"If they get away we're ruined," warned Slip.

Piney did not answer. He rode Jenkins down into the canyon. He could see the cattle, quiet in the night. Otie Heath was sleeping in his blankets. Tall, lanky Mack Summer was astride a pony, humming to the cattle, cowboy fashion.

Piney said sharply, "Mack! Reach for your gun! It's Piney Talcott!"

The lank man straightened, said, "G'wan, you yella barber. Run away!"

The blankets stirred. Heath, a real gunman, came awake baring his hogleg, looking for a target. Piney, his attention upon Summer, backed off a step and said, "Fill your hand, Mack! We mean business."

Slip was still on his horse, Piney was afoot. Heath leveled his gun at Piney. Slip drew like lightning and threw down on Heath. From above a rifle cracked.

Mack Summer pitched forward, rolled over the neck of his horse and hit the ground. Otie Heath died in his blankets, his gun unfired.

Slip thrust the smoking revolver back into his belt and cried, "The cattle! Get 'em movin'!"

Piney ran for his horse. He had not worked it right, he thought despondently. He recognized his mistake—he hadn't allowed for Otie's waking up and taking instant action. There was, he found, a technique which had to be learned. He had meant to fight it out with Mack—and he had nearly been killed. He was grateful to Slip and to

Pico—but now there was riding to be done.

The cattle, disturbed by the shots, were milling. Pico came down with his black and headed them westward. Slip was riding behind, crying out, waving his quirt. Piney took the left flank and began working them, using their terror as a spur, chasing them over to the valley where the others waited. It would make five hundred head, he reckoned, a neat blow at the Kaytee, although not a damaging loss to them. Slip had maybe stolen five hundred previously, in small bands, which he had sold to the obliging Mexicans for over-the-river resale. That number was still less than the cattle taken at the burning of the Corner Z!

He had cause to be elated, yet he was not. He did not, in his simple soul, enjoy taking justice into his own hands, even when the case was as clear as this one. Even when the cows taken were his own.

LIGE MORAN and his men were riding furiously on the trail of the stolen cattle, but John Strang remained behind. He saw to the burial of Heath and Summer, he studied the sign. Long ago, in Indian country, John Strang had learned how to read sign very well indeed. Many things he had learned from the fierce Comanches. . . .

He mounted the ridge to the north of Lost Canyon and found the place where Pico had fired his rifle shot. He came down and read the evidence that there had been three men in the attack. He tilted his hat back upon his head and brooded, his eyes slitting, rage rising within him. Heath and Summer had been good gun-slingers, valuable men.

He leaned down to pick up a bit of cloth caught in a bush. He held it in his fingers, turning it over and over. He frowned, shaking his head. Anyone could be wearing blue jeans in this country. The jagged piece he held was worthless as evidence unless he found the pants from which it had been torn. He again examined all the tracks of the men who had marauded his herd.

He stopped dead at a certain spot. A heel mark was very plain in the soft earth. He got down on his hands and knees, putting his face close to the imprint.

He got up, pale with passion, caught up his horse, and spurred viciously back to the Kaytee. He drank a pint of whiskey, nursing

his knowledge of that flat, wide heelmark, remembering how Piney Talcott had run so swiftly in his flat boots to save Junior Mason. He pondered the accurate gunfire, knowing that Piney never wore weapons and was supposedly without knowledge of their use.

When Lige came back he recited his belief, ending, "If there'd been razor work, we could be sure. I'm for taking care of that damned barber right now."

Lige said slowly, "We can take a look for those pants. If we find 'em—the sheriff can do the job. We're respectable now. We're gettin' rich."

"We won't be rich long if it keeps happenin' like this," said Strang darkly. "The barber, his Mex kid—and someone else. Now, I wonder who the third rat can be?"

Lige said, "It don't matter. I'll send a man after the sheriff—it's Wednesday and Piney'll be in the shop."

Strang went out to where the men lounged about, hunkered down on their heels, discussing the cattle raid and the death of their friends.

He said, "Okie, Texas Joe—Rannie. Sad-dle up. Pick six others. We're goin' to town."

He had named the three closest to Heath and Summer. He knew his tough outfit to the core. He saw to his guns and turned to Lige. His partner said, "Get the evidence first. We got to have the town on our side, this time."

Strang swallowed a hot retort. The rage within him was growing to a white heat. The urge to kill was on him, a virulent thing, driving him. He caught up his own horse, trying to still his burning desire. He was a man accustomed to rule, unwilling to accept affront. The thought of the lean barber stealing his cows, killing his men was choking him.

PINEY fingered the hole in his blue jeans. He remembered backing off from Mack Summer, stepping momentarily against the mesquite's jagged points. He shook his head, carrying the trousers, walking out back of the shop.

Pico said, "We sew them up?"

"No," said Piney. "We get rid of them."

Pico said, "Si, senior," and took the pants. Piney went back into the shop and began shaving Lawyer Mason. But Pico was thrifty. He carried the pants down to the adobe hut where he lived alone and pro-

ceeded to mend them with care. They fit him very well indeed and he grinned, donning them, anxious to show his boss that he had saved the price of a new pair.

Tom Mason was retying his necktie when Pico came beaming into the shop. Lige Moran and John Strang clattered up and dismounted. Although it was midweek, there were a dozen Kaytee riders along the street. Mason turned and stared at Piney, paling.

Piney said, "Go slowly. This may be a bluff."

The sheriff was a blustering big man. He stayed on the other side of the street while Lige and John came into the shop. Pico was brushing the pool table, his slant eyes blank, his back turned to the action.

Piney said, "What do you gents want today?" His voice and hands, he found, were very steady.

Lige's eyes fell at once upon the patched jeans. He took a great stride, wheeled Pico about in heavy grasp, jerked out the bit of blue stuff and thrust it at the patch. Allowing for trimming, the fit was correct. Lige's fist slammed into the boy's face, knocking him out through the barber shop door.

He yelled, "Sheriff! Here's your damned murderer."

Piney licked at dry lips. He said mildly, "Now wait, Lige. What's this all about?"

John Strang's hand fastened on Piney's shirtfront. The big man shook Piney back and forth, slowly, his sharp eyes probing. He said, "Maybe you know damn well. Maybe you were there, too. Three men killed Mack and Otie, and rustled Kaytee cattle. Maybe you want to deny you were there?"

Piney said, "I sure wouldn't admit it!"

The sheriff had handcuffs on Pico. There was a bloody streak on the lad's face where Lige had struck, but there was no fear in him.

Lige said, "You're wearing those flat heels, Piney. Nobody else around here wears them."

The sheriff drew forth another pair of handcuffs. Strang hurled Piney against the doorjamb. He bounced, turning. He heard Lige bellow, "I demand the arrest of this damn barber!"

Slip was far away in the hills. Lawyer Mason was no bulwark of defense. Piney's mind raced. He staggered, purposefully. Lige's big black horse was not securely tied to the rail. Piney's quick, strong hand

snapped loose the reins from the hitchrack.

He made one jump and landed in the saddle. Bending low, he kicked at the amazed horse's ribs. He heard the singing of the first bullet, then he had the black under control and came around. He put the animal straight at them, into the teeth of their drawn guns. He stayed low, on the neck of the animal and drew out the razor he had automatically folded into his pocket when the ruckus started.

The big sheriff made a leap to grab the bridle, while Lige and John Strang, caught unawares, were scrambling for safety. Pico came around, slipping his thin wrists from the awkward, ancient handcuffs. In one jump he was up behind Piney.

THE razor licked out. The sheriff's arm showed red; he fell away, howling more in fright than in pain at the sight of the opened razor. The black horse made two jumps and turned a corner. Piney immediately slid down from its back and with a slap, sent it kiting for home.

Pico, rubbing his wrists, said, "We run now, eh?"

Piney was already racing for the rear of his shop. The stable door was open and in a trice they had saddles on Jenkins and the pony. They could hear the yelling and excitement outdoors as the Kaytee formed a posse for pursuit. Piney reached in the bag and got his guns. He pulled the belt buckle tight and said, "You better ride and get Slip. He'll want in on this. We're in the open, now."

Pico said, "I no stay with you?"

"Take the short cut, evade the draw and give the signal from the mesa top. Slip'll be around," said Piney. "I'm not running from Saddleville. You take Jenkins along so they'll think I've gone even when they find the black is riderless."

Pico said reluctantly, "You plenty smart, *senor*. But I no like to leave you."

Piney said, "Get Slip. It's important, Pico."

The Mexican youth shrugged and mounted. Dusk was not far away and the lad could ride like a ghost, Piney knew. The two horses disappeared past the fence which Piney had erected for just such an emergency.

Piney drew a deep breath and examined his guns. The months of practice would have

to pay off now, he thought. If Slip could get in, striking with the vantage of surprise, there might even be a chance. . . .

But if he had submitted to arrest by the sheriff, with all those Kaytee riders in town, there would have been a lynching and he knew it well. The tin horns and hangers-on of the Kaytee and the Keystone bar would have seen to that, while Lige and John remained in the background. The Kaytee, he realized, meant to do things legally—up to a certain point. The sheriff was a fine tool in their hands.

He walked cautiously along the fence towards the shop where Alice would be waiting for some word. He had to be very careful not to involve her. Lige would not be able to save her from John Strang's vitriolic rage if she were suspected of complicity in the war Piney had started.

On Main Street, the Kaytee men left to keep the pot boiling were swearing that Piney and Pico would dance from the end of ropes that night. Piney wished that the sun would go completely to rest. He needed time to wait for Slip, to make plans against this sudden and unfortunate turn of events.

He scratched at the back door of Alice's shop. There was no reply. He tried again.

The door opened. One of the Kaytee men was holding Alice's mouth, throttling her attempt to warn Piney. Okie laughed and said, "Come on in, barber. John'll be tickled to know you walked in on us. It proves he was right!"

BUT THEY did not know about the guns. They were accustomed to seeing him unarmed, to the belief that he never carried weapons and was not a fighter. He had been slapped around with impunity by Lige and John and they expected no trouble from him.

It was scant advantage against two men. But Piney had the right hand gun out and was steadying it, not making a flashy attempt at a quick shot, aiming it to kill. He pressed the trigger and the gun boomed very loudly in the little back room of the shop. Okie bounced against the wall.

The second man could have had him, but Piney had counted upon Alice. She threw her weight to one side and the Kaytee hand went off balance as he tried to get in his shot. Piney cut him down with ease.

He stood there, the gun smoking. His

pulse was going like a winning race horse.

He said numbly, "First time I ever shot at a man, Alice. It—it kinda makes me sick—but he—they—were maulin' you!"

Alice said rapidly, "John Strang sent them. He suspects that I've been pumping Lige for information. He's very smart—smarter than we thought."

Mechanically Piney filled the empty chambers of his gun. The two Kaytee men lay awkwardly upon the floor. One was not quite dead and his low moans were terrible in Piney's ears. But Alice seemed not to listen, or to care.

She said, "If Slip could come in, it would be better."

He told her about Pico. She nodded. "Lige and John rode out with the posse. But they'll be back. Strang is the best sign reader in the country."

Piney said, "I'm not running. I'm through with sneaking around."

She said, "They'll kill you, Piney. You're no crack shot."

Piney put the gun back in the holster. He said, "I'm good enough. Slip said so. Barbers have steady hands, Alice. I may not be so swift on the draw—but I won't miss Lige or John."

She insisted, "You should ride out, circle them, and bring Slip and Pico back."

"I'm going back to my shop," said Piney grimly. He bent and seized the heels of the nearest dead Kaytee man. The corpse was amazingly heavy, but he tugged it through the back door and into the alley. He dragged the other one after, piling them neatly.

"Stay close and don't let Strang near you. Have you got a gun?"

She said, "You must have gone crazy, Piney. You can't stay in the shop. . . ."

Piney said, "It's time to come out and fight them. They'd have hanged us all. They came after you!"

"They wouldn't have really harmed me," she said. "Piney, you must—"

He saw the real concern in her and it gave him a warm feeling. He said, "Thank you, Alice."

He went out before she could say any more.

He stepped gingerly around the two dead men and proceeded along the alley to his shop. He went through the rear door and there were four men playing pool, local fellows, not Kaytee men. Their eyes bugged at

BLOOD, SWEAT AND SIXGUNS

the sight of him, then they turned as one and fled.

He put up the pool cues and straightened the balls in the rack. The cue ball rolled about on the green cloth. It stopped near the side pocket. Piney grinned at it, then went to his razors and began stropping the one he had nicked upon the sheriff's forearm.

He finished the task, put the razor in his pocket and looked at his watch. It was his regular closing time, so he reached up and turned off the lamps. The friendliness of the dark, familiar shop was a comfort. He sat in the chair with his feet propped up and waited.

WHEN he heard the sound of the horses he stretched, dropped his feet to the floor and listened, haunched, a slight, insignificant figure. The word would be out, spread by the pool players, that Piney Talcott was in town, in his shop. He heard loud voices, then footsteps. He hitched the guns into place and took a place near the pool table.

In the rear were other, stealthier sounds. He wheeled and called in a low voice, "Slip?" "Yeah," came the reply. "I'll lay low. They're on their way, a passel of 'em!"

Piney said, "It's all right, Slip. Don't get hurt and take care of Alice. I'm ready for 'em. I'm tired of—"

The door shattered under a sudden attack. Kaytee men surged, yelling. Piney drew the right hand gun and held it on them, steady as a rock. The left gun was for use only when the other was empty, as Slip had taught him. He said:

"Back up there, you all!"

Lige came pushing through. The Kaytee men stood under Piney's guns, unbelieving, hesitant, unable to see plainly in the light reflected from the street lamp.

Lige said, "You dirty little murderer!"

His hands dipped down. His big body hunched, his eyes flashed. The Kaytee men came to life.

Piney fired once, twice. He said clearly, "Get your gun out, Lige. I'm givin' you evens!"

Lige whipped out his weapon. Two Kaytee men were staggering. From the rear of the shop there was a rattle of fire. The other gunslingers were milling, caught in hot water, surprised by the crossfire.

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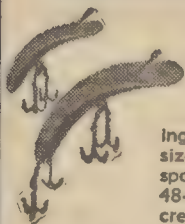
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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

Piney held the gun at hip height, aiming by pointing a metaphorical fingertip. He pressed the trigger evenly, watching Lige. Then he stepped aside, quickly.

Lige's gun burst into flame. Piney's left arm spun, the gun dropped from his fingers.

He saw Tom Mason coming across the street. The other Kaytee men were stopped, for Tom was carrying a shotgun, menacing the crowd. Lige took another step, then seemed to buckle at the knees. Upon his face was an expression of utter amazement and disbelief.

Piney heard the shots from the doorway, but only his left arm seemed damaged. He saw John Strang leap away from the mob and managed to duck aside as the big man began blasting with two guns, smashing glass, sending the lead through the shop.

Piney put down the gun to steady himself. The shock of the bullet wound in his arm was wearing off. His hand touched the cue ball and some instinct bade him pick it up.

He held it in his right hand as John Strang came through the door, brave as a lion, going to the attack without thought of anything but the kill. His wolfish, thin lips curled back and he balanced on his tiny feet, seeking Piney in the whirl of black smoke and the sound of popping guns. Piney drew back and threw the pool ball with all his might.

The gun in John's hand flew wide. The ball struck the side of his head, driving him back, shutting off his vision.

Piney reached for the gun on the table. Pico wailed, "John got Sleep! It is bad, señor!"

Piney got the gun up. Strang was coming about, drawing a weapon from his waistband. Strang said, "I'm finishin' you now. It shoulda been done long since, you damn barber!"

Piney held the gun steady. He fired.

There was an empty, horrible click.

PINEY doubled over, his left arm dangling useless. His right hand found the razor and he dove forward, into the fire of Strang's gun. He felt the lead whack into him, but he could not even tell where, now that he was going to finish it, once and for all. *Tom Mason, Junior, Alice—the quiet little people of the town—they would have peace again, if he could only go on. . . .*

He locked his wounded left arm over John

BLOOD, SWEAT AND SIXGUNS

Strang's gun. He deflected the muzzle, whipped the razor once, twice. He staggered away, collapsed over the pool table.

He heard Strang go down, heard Tom Mason saying levelly, "There'll be no more violence. I'll blast the first man who moves. There's a new deal coming to Saddleville!"

He would have to get a new cover for the pool table, he thought, if he did not stop bleeding all over it. He essayed to move and knew then that Strang's bullet was in his shoulder muscles, on the left side, and he could get along pretty well. He had to see Slip. . . .

He got to the back of the shop and Alice was there, trying to stop the bleeding. But there was a hole in Slip's chest, on the left side. Strangely, Slip's face looked young again, like it used to, before the Kaytee made an outlaw of him.

He looked up at Piney and said clearly, "We did it. Both Lige and John. You got 'em both, Piney. Guess I taught you to hold that ole hogleg steady, didn't I? Guess you'll rebuild Corner Z pronto, huh?"

Piney said, "The doc'll be here . . . you'll be all right."

Slip smiled and said, "Now it's you who will take care of Alice . . . so—long, folks. It was a good fi—"

He died, smiling. Pico sobbed once, then was still. Piney lurched away, leaning against the wall. But outdoors he heard Tom Mason saying, "That's right. You Kaytee riders fork your broncs and get out. And don't come back. The undertaker'll clean up for you!"

The little farmers and the ranchers would be coming back. Out to the mesa, the land would be peaceful again. Slip was dead and Piney was feeling ill himself—but Saddleville was cleared of unrest.

There was still work to be done. Piney had to go help Tom Mason. . . . He actually made four steps towards the front door before Alice caught him and eased him into the barber chair. He muttered, "Got to have peace—"

She was weeping, but she was holding on to him. The doc was coming and Piney knew he would live, all right. He could feel it in his aching bones and in the pressure of Alice's strong hand. He would live to see peace over Saddleville—his town.

THE END

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

(Continued from page 37)

other men—for an answer to his troubles, but Rusk had showed him the greatest helper a man had—himself.

He slept a long time after he had eaten, and when he awoke he had enough strength to start the long walk across the badlands toward water and food. But he did not turn toward Assiniboin.

Charlie Running Horse would not meet Raleigh Rusk, because there were no buffalo. Rusk knew this, but it was not important, for it was the search that counted. But, as the hunter had said, there were wild horses to trap, and the railroad gangs and army posts would pay in gold.



For the first time, Charlie Running Horse was aware that he had outlived the counsel of his forefathers, for there was no disgrace for the man who could shake off the discouraging hands of others and shape his own life to the mould of his desires.

After the badlands were behind him he turned once and gazed northward over the trackless land that had swallowed Raleigh Rusk. He raised his hand in silent salute and spoke to the still air, "Go with God, my friend, and good hunting."

Then the young Sioux in the red silk shirt and high-peaked hat walked down a cedar-studded slope toward a railroad camp. His step had the spring of one who had suddenly come by great riches, and his heart was full of gratefulness to the man who had given him this wealth, full of thanks to Raleigh Rusk. For the old buffalo hunter had shared with Charlie Running Horse his greatest treasure—his domain.

MOB FEVER

(Continued from page 60)

odor of burning coaloil wafted down the hallway. At first it was a thin whiff, ugly and odorous. Then the fire smell came. It wretched its way into the nostrils, and senses, like poisonous feelers of some on-coming monster.

Dorbandt and Bass struggled with Hickman at the bars. Bass flung over his shoulder, "You better talk quick, Nesbitt!"

Frey leaned against the opposite wall, staring at the rear door, gun dangling in his hand. "All right," he mumbled, "I did the best I could. At least I got Gonzales out. Let 'em burn it!"

Now they heard the first crackle of flames. Fire was taking hold of wood. Smoke traces floated by, then came more thickly. Within seconds, flickering reflections of fire showed on the walls.

"It'll go like dry grass!" Frey gritted. "And you men started it—it's your mob!"

"Frey—for Heaven's sake!" Hickman's voice was a scream of panic.

"I got plenty of time," Frey grunted. He fanned at the smoke and coughed. "When I have to, I'm taking out through the front. You got yourself into this and you can damn well roast!"

Somewhere in back, something crashed. Fire shadows dimmed. Fresh waves of smoke floated down the hallway. The yellow reflections danced up again on the walls.

Nesbitt called his name. He was crouched on the cell floor, behind the others, pulling at the bars, pushing himself between Hickman and Dorbandt. One of them kicked angrily at Nesbitt's head.

"He did it!" Bass shouted, trying to crowd up.

"I did it!" Nesbitt gasped. Pleading eyes, smoke-stung and dazed, peered up. The big man's mouth hung open and his face was greasy wet. "I killed Absher. Don't let us burn up in here!"

Frey stared dully down at him. Dorbandt looked like an animal in a steel trap.

"You making that up, just to get out?"

Bass almost screamed. "No, dammit, he did kill Absher! I saw the frameup! I was there when we took Gonzales. Now for Heaven's sake, get us out of here!"

"You hear that, Hickman? Dorbandt? You satisfied?"

Hickman muttered, "I sort of figured he

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FIFTEEN WESTERN TALES

did." But Dorbandt kicked brutally at Nesbitt, calling him names in snarling hate.

Frey ducked into the smoke and made his way back to the kitchen. Through the pall, he sighted Gonzales. The man had a cloth tied about his face. He was feeding more stove kindling and old magazines into the fires that smouldered in two large tin wash tubs on the kitchen floor.

"Douse it, Gonzales. Water's in that keg. How the hell'd you stand this smoke?"

In the jail yard, a breathless quiet was punctured by a yell: "The building's on fire."

Frey grinned to himself, but broke into coughing. Eyes burning, his lungs feeling seared by the trash blaze fumes, he walked back to the cell.

"Hickman, just you, first." He fisted his gun, inserted the key. "You others—get back to the wall!"

He braced the door with his foot, letting Hickman slide through, then relocked it.

"Now get outside and spread the word. I want some damn fast action. Tell 'em Nesbitt confessed. And tell 'em to go home."

He let Hickman out the front, ignoring the calls of the others.

"They're burning the building," Dorbandt raged, "and you still—"

"Relax, Dorbandt. The only fire was in a couple of tin tubs—and your imagination. You got mob fever. I think the crowd outside is getting over theirs. When a stampede like that turns uncertain, it's time to go home. . . . All right, you and Bass come out. When the smoke's cleared, you can write some statements for the court."

Nesbitt stumbled to the iron bunk. He put his head in his hands. The sound of the lock was loud. He looked now, thought Frey, like Gonzales did a little while ago. Gonzales was emerging through the still lingering smoke.

"You all right, Gonzales?"

"Si, estoy bueno—muy calor! Gracias, senor!"

Frey looked at the sooty, creased face of the stooped rider and grinned wearily. Gonzales flashed white teeth and batted his smoke-bleared eyes.

"Let's air the place out," Frey said. "Then Bass and Dorbandt can help us clean up the mess. The sheriff likes a jail kept neat."

(Continued from page 77)

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The penitent badman then became an evangelist and toured the country with a wagon and team of horses. He later appeared in Wild West shows, always billed as "Texas Jack, Train Robber."

☆ ☆ ☆

A rancher of near Aztec, N. M., Kenneth Blancett rides nearly 6000 miles on horseback each year, just to keep an eye on a gas line. Blancett is one of four line riders for the Southern Union Gas Co. in Northern New Mexico. He and his big red stallion, Shamrock, have to buck searing summer heat and bitter cold winters, mountains, canyons and desert.

☆☆☆

The code of the West, it would seem, still functions. Herbert Frizzell, a rodeo rider, was cleared of murder in two hours by a jury after they heard that the dead man, Henry (Buck) Jones reached for his belt. "I knew one of us wasn't gonna be there long, Jedge," said Frizzell, "and I was powerful sure I didn't want it to be me."

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